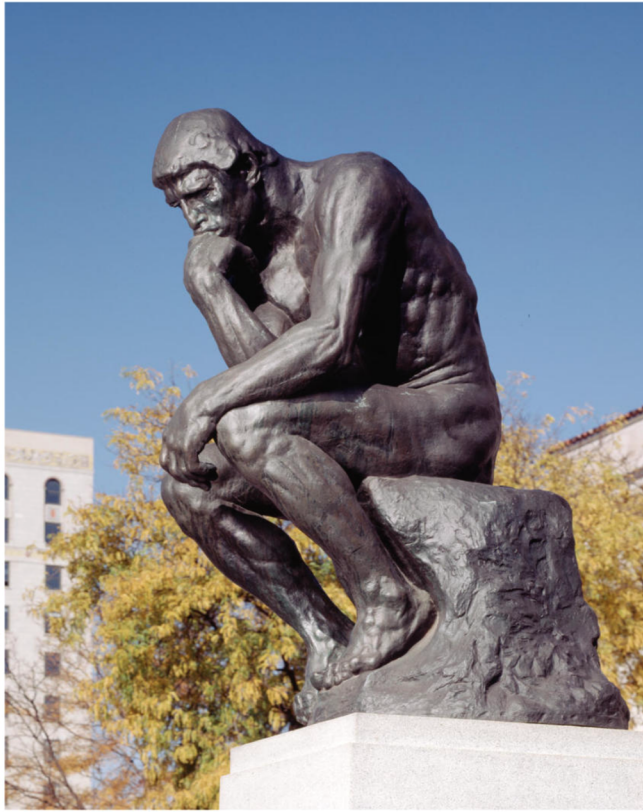# Voices for More Relevant, More Effective Adult Foundational Education Systems

Tools for Those
Open to Changing their Minds about AFE

Book One in a Two-Book Collection of Messages Posted to the NLA Discussion Group in September-December 2024

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January 23, 2025

Contents

Cover: "The Thinker" by Auguste Rodin, 1904, at Detroit Institute of Arts
(photo by DIA Custom Prints)

Introduction

This book presents a series of eleven messages that I posted to the on-line NLA Discussion Group from September 10, 2024 to November 2, 2024.[1] The messages present arguments made over four decades by dozens of advocates for the creation of U.S. adult foundational education (AFE) systems that better serve more learners and the communities they participate in. Such systems would be designed and supported by learners and community stakeholders, to help them deal effectively with social, economic, and other challenges and opportunities they face.

These messages are largely adapted from other documents I wrote – with help from colleagues -- between 2019 and 2024. A few are new ones that emerged during these two months, as I interacted with colleagues and monitored developments in the AFE field and in our nation. The messages were presented with the hope that they would be useful – informative and inspiring – to those who are open to the idea of a better way to do adult foundational education. Such new thinking is long overdue and will be especially vital now as our field and nation entire a new chapter in our interwoven histories.

The eleven messages below were followed by a second series of seven messages sent to the NLA Discussion Group in November and December, 2024. Those messages described seven actions that change-minded supporters of AFE can take to help the field transition to the kind of model called for in the first eleven messages. The second series of messages is presented in a companion volume titled "What We Can Do to Build More Relevant, More Effective Adult Foundational Education Systems."

I thank David Rosen (my colleague and friend and long-time moderator of the NLA Discussion Group) for giving me the opportunity to share these messages. And I thank those who have taken the time to read, consider, and share them. I also salute the many people (and their networks) whose outstanding work is cited in these nearly 80 pages. I look forward to further constructive dialogue and action to build more relevant, more effective adult foundational education systems– at all levels and in all corners of our field.

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January 23, 2025

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[1] The messages below are very lightly edited versions of the original postings, with minor corrections of typos, replacing of a few words, and formatting of text for consistency across messages. In Message 11, I have added a new, important citation (by Belzer and Kim) that I had overlooked in the original version.

Summary

Adult foundational education (AFE)[2] in the United States has a significant history of helping diverse groups of adult learners develop the basic skills and other assets (e.g., background knowledge, credentials, socio-emotional strengths, life plans, support systems) they need to move forward with work, family, civic, and lifelong learning goals. In so doing, AFE also provides useful supports to other community stakeholders who rely on and/or serve those adult learners. (Those other stakeholders include healthcare providers, K-12 schools, employers, labor unions, correctional facilities, and organizations that serve immigrants and refugees, people with disabilities, under-employed youth and adults, and other populations.) AFE has also generated decades of research, instructional and assessment tools, models of professional development, customized service models, and other resources that it can build on. But, despite those significant achievements, AFE has historically not served more than ten percent of the estimated millions of U.S. adults who could benefit from high-quality AFE services. (Would the U.S healthcare system be satisfied if no more than ten percent of those who face health challenges made use of healthcare services?)

This apparent low usage of AFE services might be due to some combination of low and unpredictable budgets (as compared, for example, to the funding given to K-12 schools); lack of relevance, accessibility, intensity, or quality of the instructional and management practices used; or the fact that adults typically have to juggle many different responsibilities and challenges which make regular participation in education activities difficult or impossible. The fact that there are few professional opportunities (e.g., in-depth training, full-time jobs that provide family-sustaining wages and benefits) for adult educators to do this work likely further undermines the quality and quantity of AFE services.

The important question of relevance to learner needs and realities is central to the eleven messages presented below. (These were originally posted as separate messages to the

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[2] *Adult foundational education (AFE)* is used in this document as an umbrella term encompassing the mix of services sometimes called "adult literacy," "adult basic education," "adult secondary education" (or "GED/HSE preparation"), ""ESL/ESOL," and contextualized education for workforce/ workplace literacy, college preparation, citizenship preparation, family literacy, financial literacy, and other applied uses of basic skills. This term helps distinguish our field from K-12 and for-credit higher education and other activities that might fall under the heading of "adult education." It was first introduced in 2021-2022 by the Open Door Collective, which encouraged adult education stakeholders to incorporate it into how they talk about the field. The above definition is my own, continually evolving interpretation of the term.

online NLA Discussion Group in September – November 2024.) Most of these messages focus on why and how AFE should be seen as a way to help learners deal with particular challenges and opportunities they face in their lives as workers, family members, citizens, and lifelong learners. Readers are asked to consider:

- The need to be open to (ready, willing, and able to learn) new ways of doing AFE that better serve more learners and communities;
- How "community" can be both a goal and resource for AFE;
- How AFE can support adult learners as problem-solvers and leaders, for the benefit of such social and economic building blocks as:
  - democracy,
  - public health,
  - a well-equipped, well-supported workforce,
  - stronger families,
  - supporting individuals and communities impacted by the criminal justice system,
  - environmental sustainability.

Most of these arguments and models have been around for decades, but too often they have been lost and overlooked in current discourse about the why's and how's of AFE. They are presented here with the hope that those educators, policy makers, funders, and other partners who seriously want to build more effective, better-supported AFE systems relevant to our current and emerging society will consider these voices as they advocate for, plan, and support AFE systems reform at program, local, state, or national levels. (A separate, companion book following this one will contain seven additional messages that were posted to the NLA Discussion Group in November – December 2024. This second set of messages identify actions that AFE advocates can take to help the field transition to more relevant, more effective systems.)

Message #1

Learning from Benjamin Franklin

September 10, 2024

Introduction

Benjamin Franklin is revered as a multi-talented, visionary leader of the American fight for independence. As a young man, he was also a slaveholder.

But he changed his mind about slavery, influenced by abolitionists in America and other countries where he lived, his lived experience, and his roles in shaping the direction of the new United States of America. In his later years, he became an outspoken opponent of slavery and in 1790 sent a petition to the First U.S. Congress, calling for the new government to abolish slavery. (That idea was tabled for 75 years until 1865 when slavery was finally abolished by Congress.)

How might Ben Franklin's transition from slaveowner to outspoken abolitionist inform those of us who advocate for adult foundational education (AFE) in the U.S.? What do we do to, as Franklin advised the U.S "Founding Fathers," "change our mind" about an important set of questions at this critical time in the U.S.? How might we rethink the purposes of AFE and how we might create more effective AFE systems? How can AFE better help more adult learners and communities manage the opportunities and challenges they face in our nation today and in the future?

The following message offers possible answers to those questions. It is written for consideration by those interested in creating more effective systems of AFE in the U.S.

Benjamin Franklin changed his mind about slavery

Little known fact: Benjamin Franklin (whom many revere as a multi-talented, visionary leader of the American fights for independence from England and for the abolition of slavery) was also a slave-holder as a young man. As a young printer in Philadelphia, he published advertisements for the sale of slaves in his newspaper, while also printing Quaker anti-slavery pamphlets. He also spoke against the practice of slavery in his private correspondence. But he did not publicly speak out against slavery until very late in his life. His family owned enslaved people as early as 1735, including at least seven individuals: Joseph, Jemima, Peter, King, Othello, George, and Bob.

In 1757, Franklin (accompanied by his son William) brought Peter and King with them to London (where slavery had no legal basis) when Franklin served as representative of the Pennsylvania assembly to England until 1775. King ran away and took up residence in

Suffolk County, England, where a Christian woman taught him to read and write. Franklin's negative views of slavery grew as he witnessed the growing abolitionist movements outside the U.S., first in England and then in France (where he served as U.S. Ambassador from 1776 to 1785). From London he supported the cause of Black education in colonial American cities and attacked slavery anonymously in print.

When the U.S. Constitution was ratified, he became an outspoken opponent of slavery. In 1789 he wrote several essays supporting abolition. His last public act was to send to Congress a petition on behalf of the Pennsylvania Society for Abolition of Slavery asking for the abolition of slavery and an end to the slave trade. (The Society not only advocated for abolition but attempted to integrate freed slaves into American society.) His writings also included a parody of pro-slavery arguments that slaves were needed because whites could not do physical labor in the hot climate of the South.

Franklin's petition (sent to Vice President John Adams) asked the First Congress to "devise means for removing the Inconsistency (of slavery) from the Character of the American people," and to "promote mercy and justice toward this distressed Race."

The petition was introduced to the House and Senate on, respectively, February 12 and February 15, 1790. It was quickly denounced by pro-slavery congressmen and sparked a heated debate in both Houses. After some back-and-forth, which included the claim that "the Constitution restrains Congress from prohibiting the importation or emancipation of slaves until 1808," the petition was tabled on March 5, 1790. Two months later, on April 17, 1790, Franklin died at the age of 84. His funeral became a national event, attended by some 20,000 people. It took Congress another 75 years to abolish slavery.

His view on "changing one's mind" is captured in this quotation:

> *For having lived long, I have experienced many instances of being obliged, by better information or fuller consideration, to change opinions, even on important subjects, which I once thought right but found to be otherwise.*

(Above information about Benjamin Franklin taken from a number of sources, including those listed at the end of this message.)

How might Benjamin Franklin's thinking on slavery be relevant to AFE advocates today?

I would argue that:

- Our field needs a frank, informed, sustained evaluation of the strengths and limitations of AFE as a tool for strengthening U.S. communities.

- To build on AFE's current strengths while avoiding or eliminating its limitations, we need a new vision and arguments for AFE. That vision would state how AFE – in partnership with other stakeholders – can better help more individuals and their communities manage the opportunities and challenges they now face.
- Guided by that vision, we also need a strategy for an AFE reform initiative (at national, state, and local levels and within particular stakeholder groups) that creates AFE systems that:
  - support integrated, contextualized, participatory/collaborative AFE models customized to the multiple learning needs of diverse adults and communities.
  - provide the supports (from multiple public and private sources) that such services require.

For such an AFE systems reform to happen will require us to be willing to "change our minds" (as Franklin did about slavery, an issue low on the radar of most Americans in those busy days of early independence) about they why's and how's of AFE. We need to clarify:

- who the learners and communities are that we hope to serve and how basic skills-related limitations impact learner abilities to perform work, family, civic, and lifelong learning roles;
- how AFE can -- in partnerships with diverse stakeholders -- better understand and respond to learner and community needs and strengths;
- what a systems reform initiative (to help AFE programs and partners create high-quality supports for their communities) might consist of; and
- how public and private sources can support such AFE systems reform in the U.S.

The good news is that many individuals and groups in the field have been developing the above kinds of arguments and strategies for some time. Supporters of AFE have been arguing for decades that AFE is too narrow in its focus and under-equipped to provide the high-quality services that adults and communities can benefit from. And, beyond complaining, many have also been developing promising customized service models and strategies for generating supports for those models.

At the same time, many in our field are stuck in a "compliance" mode, saying that current funding and policy require a narrow concept of what AFE can do and don't provide adequate financial and other supports for relevant, high-quality AFE. Some argue that current political polarization at the Congressional and state levels makes significant AFE systems reform unlikely. Some also argue that administrators of AFE systems are simply unaware of other ways of providing and supporting more-effective AFE.

But are we, more fundamentally as a nation and as a field, also stuck in a "crisis of imagination"? Are we not willing or able to learn from past and even recent experience in our field to propose more effective AFE models? Are we too busy doing what's immediately in front of us and chasing after new funding and "innovations"? Is "being stuck" also in part a result of former individuals and organizations who took a lead on such issues now no longer being active in the field, due to retirement, drying up of funding, exhaustion, or other reasons?   Are we too satisfied with simplistic platitudes about how AFE can solve society's problems (without also acknowledging that quality AFE services require use of effective practices and have qualified, adequately supported staff to do this demanding work)? Or maybe we are in a "crisis of courage," too afraid to question what current policy makers and advocates are saying and doing?

Might we learn from thinkers in the environmental movement who argue that the climate crisis is a crisis of imagination and from national security experts who say that our national security apparatus was caught flat-footed on September 11, 2001, not able to imagine that terrorists could turn airliners into flying bombs and attack us on U.S. soil?

To support those who have already changed their minds about the need for an AFE systems reform effort and others who might be willing to do so, I'm going to post a series of messages (shown below) to this NLA discussion group over the next few months. The messages will begin with diverse "voices" who have argued for a well-equipped and more broadly relevant system. Following those voices, subsequent posts will provide examples of how AFE programs use effective practices to respond to a range of learner and community interests.

Please read, share, and constructively comment on these messages as you see fit.

Sources for the above information about Benjamin Franklin

- National Archives: https://www.archives.gov/legislative/features/franklin
- Ken Burns Film "Benjamin Franklin": https://www.pbs.org/video/franklin-and-antislavery-movement-58fn35/
- Benjamin Franklin House: https://benjaminfranklinhouse.org/education/benjamin-franklin-and-slavery/

Message #2

Voices for Democracy

September 16, 2024

For decades, adult educators have argued for AFE as a tool for democracy. Here is a sampling:

In 2022, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning made the case for "citizenship education" as a key component of Adult Learning and Education (ALE). This was proposed as a way to counter "fault lines in our societies, among them a deficit of trust in political processes, the fragmenting and polarizing potential of information technology, the persistence of 'us versus them' narratives, failures to pursue the ideals of solidarity and multilateralism, and growing inequality within and between countries" (p.15).

> *Rather than merely reacting or adapting to work-related, technological or environmental change, however, ALE must be reconceptualized to empower adults to be active citizens contributing towards shaping their own future and that of the planet . . . Indeed, the development and application of the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values of citizenship are themselves lifelong and life-wide processes. This entails understanding civic principles and institutions, knowing how to engage in civil society, exercising critical thinking, and developing an appreciation of the rights and responsibilities of a citizen . . . the key characteristic of learners will not be their age but their willingness to bring about personal and social change. (Citizenship education can) yield benefits . . . such as increased self-esteem, empowerment, and openness to change and the resumption of learning. Citizenship education also plays a vital role in promoting tolerance, respecting diversity and preventing conflicts . . . (It) enables individuals to care about each other, embrace alternative perspectives and experiences, and engage in responsible practices with regard to the environment and shared natural resources (p.17).*

In 2020, Ira Yankwitt (Spring 2020, p.59) of the New York City Literacy Assistance Center wrote:

> *In the 20 years since the implementation of WIA (the federal Workforce Investment Act), federal funding for adult literacy education has remained largely stagnant, and actually decreased in inflation-adjusted dollars from FY2001-FY2019, despite the fact that the field serves fewer than 5% of those in need. Yet over these two decades, the field has moved away from identifying itself as part of the broader struggle for human rights and social justice. I contend that for those of us working*

with and in marginalized, exploited, and under-resourced communities, we must align our programs fully and explicitly with the grassroots movements for racial, social, and economic justice that are working to dismantle systemic inequities. . .

. . . this is both a moral imperative and . . . a smart political strategy. . . it is only by aligning ourselves with grassroots movements for justice that we can hope to also build the movement we need to elevate the importance of adult literacy education, increase funding, and advocate for a system that makes it possible for our students to truly realize their lifelong and life-wide goals.

In a 2002 essay for the Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy, Forrest Chisman (February 2002) wrote:

Any case for adult education and literacy – any rationale for why it matters and why the federal government, the states, and ordinary citizens should care about it – must be based squarely on mainstream American principles and the American experience (p.1).

Adequate education is essential to the economic prospects, the social standing, the civic participation, the personal safety, and the self-esteem of every person. Central to American democratic values is the equal worth of each and every man and woman. To deprive these Americans adequate education is to diminish their worth – in their own eyes, and in very practical ways, in the eyes of the nation. This would be a grave violation of one of this country's most important founding principles (p.11).

The need for adult education and literacy challenges us to act on those values – to rise above personal interest, partisanship, or ideology so that every individual in this nation can share in and help shape the American dream (p. 13)

Writing for the New England Literacy Resource Center in 1999, Andy Nash (1999) stated:

One of the primary purposes, historically, of adult education has been to prepare people for participation in a democracy (through, for example) English and civics lessons for newcomers who wanted citizenship, or literacy for emancipated slaves who faced literacy requirements quickly erected to keep them from voting.

We believe, however, that to really have a voice in the decisions that affect our lives, we need to go beyond voting to more direct forms of participation, such as community education, advocacy, and organizing. We also need, in a culture that celebrates the individual and the myth of the equal playing field, to recognize our

interdependence, and to acknowledge and address our inequalities. Building community, in this way, is one aspect of civic participation (p. ix).

Francis Kazemek (November 1988) proposed using collaborative learning circles as venues for helping learners to develop basic skills and other strengths:

> *They involve a small group of students and (usually) a facilitator who helps to "animate" and focus the group. Meeting together over a common text, issue, or concern, ideas and conversation are generated from within, rather than being passed down from the instructor to the students hierarchically. A learning circle relies on such activities as discussion, writing and sharing journals, writing and reading language-experience texts, reading with the assistance of a partner, modeling by instructor and peers, and group rereading of various texts . . . (p. 481).*

> *Learning and caring circles in which the teacher and students work collaboratively as co-learners build on the strengths of adults, foster mutual support, empower adults to act collectively on their world, and allow individual teachers to work with many more students (p. 482).*

In 1985, David Harman (May 1985, p.12) stated:

> *The continued incidence of illiteracy and functional illiteracy is inimical to the core beliefs and aspirations of a free, democratic, and meritorious society constantly striving to advance the quality of its environment and the lives of its citizens. It is for this reason above all that the goal of universal literacy must be pursued assiduously. It is for this reason that society must undertake a continuous re-evaluation of its educational needs and requirements, constantly updating its definitions of effective literacy . . . (as) new conditions and new realities . . . pose new challenges.*

In 1975, Frank Adams and Myles Horton described how, in the 1950s and 1960s, civil rights activists in southern states helped basic skills-challenged African-Americans to read the state constitution, a requirement to register to vote. The Citizenship Schools (of the 1950s) and Freedom Schools (of the 1960s) also helped learners develop more-general skills of cooperative problem solving. Black community members served as instructors and used meaningful vocabulary and literacy activities taken from learners' lives and interests.

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Message #3

Voices for Public Health

September 20, 2024

In March, 2023, the Office of the U.S. Surgeon General issued *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community* (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023). Describing the impacts of loneliness on public health and other aspects of society, the report identifies factors — including COVID-19, heavy reliance on social media, a decline in traditional social support systems, an aging population, declines in family-sustaining employment, and political polarization — that might be contributing to this phenomenon. It recommends actions that social stakeholders (including community-based organizations and schools and education departments) might take to reverse this course, for the well-being of the individuals directly impacted and families and society as a whole. AFE programs have a long history of welcoming and nurturing diverse groups of adult learners and their families. Adult educators and public health partners have also developed models of health literacy education that might be adapted for this newly-recognized challenge of social isolation. Read the Surgeon General's report at https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf .

In 2002, Harvard public health professor Rima Rudd (February 2002 p. 7) described research indicating that adults with lower literacy skills have higher incidence of health problems and difficulty in understanding and dealing with health challenges. The research also suggested that AFE providers often felt under-equipped to focus on health-related topics in learning activities and healthcare providers were similarly challenged in providing care to basic-skills challenged adults.

> *. . . strategies must be twofold: increase adults' health-related literacy skills and increase health professionals' communication skills. Adult educators can contribute to these efforts. Their skills and experience can help health professionals to better understand the factors that contribute to reading and oral comprehension. Educators can also help health professionals to improve written materials and, perhaps, verbal presentation of information as well. . . Studies of participatory pedagogy and efficacy-building in classrooms, community programs, and doctors' offices indicate that learning is enhanced and change is supported through experiential learning opportunities.*

The September 2008 and February 2002 issues of *Focus on Basics* focused on the theme of health and literacy partnerships. They contain articles by AFE and health experts describing projects that developed knowledge and strategies for helping adults

who face various types of basic skills challenges to better deal with health issues in their lives. See these two issues at https://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/fob/2008/fob_9b.pdf and https://www.ncsall.net/index.php@id=149.html

For more examples of the why's and how's of partnerships between AFE organizations and supporters of public health, see Open Door Collective (September 2019).

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Message #4

Voices for a Well-Equipped, Well-Supported Workforce

September 25, 2024

When we talk about "adult foundational education (AFE) for work," what are we actually talking about? More specifically:

1.   What are common arguments for "AFE for work"?
2.   What might effective work-related AFE services look like? and
3.   How can effective work-related AFE services be supported?

Presented below are some perspectives on the first of these questions (i.e., "What are common arguments for 'AFE for work'?") that forward-thinking advocates have presented over decades.   (We will discuss the other two questions later in this series.)

Common arguments for "AFE for work"

Since the explosion of interest in "adult literacy" in the 1980s, arguments for AFE have often focused on the possible economic benefits of AFE. These arguments make the case that AFE can:

- help employees find employment, stay employed, advance to better jobs, and secure family-sustaining jobs in supportive work environments.
- thereby help employers find better-equipped workers; reduce problems like high turnover rates, workplace accidents, and inefficiencies; strengthen employee morale and teamwork; and more efficiently provide the services and products that the workplace is set up to provide, while generating income for the company and its investors.
- generate taxes, jobs, and other benefits (e.g., community cohesion) for the communities in which the employees live and employers operate.
- strengthen the AFE field by producing understanding of the AFE-related needs and capacities of workers and employers; program models; partnerships with employers, labor unions, workforce centers, and other important stakeholders; curricula, assessments, and other practical tools; trained AFE professionals with relevant expertise; collaborations with and investments from various stakeholders; and other resources AFE can use to continue providing high-quality work-related services.

Such arguments have been used to generate public- and private-sector investments in AFE for incumbent workers (i.e., workplace literacy programs) and for job-seekers looking

for new employment. Those job seekers might be either unemployed, under-employed (in low-pay and/or irregular employment), or currently employed (but for various reasons motivated to find other employment that is more secure or otherwise more rewarding).

Experience in work-related AFE programs over the past four decades has been mixed in terms of the quality of the services provided and the degree and in what ways they have actually produced the above-described benefits for workers, employers, communities, and AFE itself.

Digging deeper on assumptions underlying common arguments for "AFE for work"

Shown below is a sampling of voices who have reflected on the underlying assumptions and outcomes of work-related AFE efforts of the past four decades. These are presented to encourage a more robust, evidence-informed discussion how AFE might contribute to building an economy that both:

- provides high-quality services and products that our communities and nation need;
- does so in ways that support the well-being of workers and their communities.

In Spring 2020, Stephen Reder (of Portland State University) wrote:

> *In the United States, the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) and later the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) legislation funded programs tailored to help adult students increase their standardized test scores, obtain high school equivalency, find employment, or enter vocational training or postsecondary education. Practitioners often report that these programs are designed primarily to meet the needs of employers and workforce development stakeholders rather than the needs of the adult students. To be sure, many students have goals that are consistent with the workforce development agenda, but many other adults needing stronger basic skills have other learning goals and motivations. From what I've observed, many practitioners initially resisted the rigid testing and accountability regimes that WIA/ WIOA imposed on their programs, but over time these regimes became more familiar and more widely accepted presumably because there were few alternative sources of program funding.*
>
> *Practitioners and program administrators often report difficulties working within the WIOA framework to meet the needs of all potential adult education students they could serve. WIOA's funding and compliance regimes often effectively prevent programs from serving those most in need. In responding to these persistent limitations over many years, programs have slowly lost their capacity to attract funding that connects basic skills instruction with other social aims (e.g., social justice). Similarly, difficulties obtaining funding to study aspects of adult education*

not directly tied to WIOA outcomes can discourage young scholars who want to take a more critical stance from careers as adult education researchers. These challenges can make it more difficult for the field to attract new practitioners and researchers.

We need funding for basic skills programs that are designed to meet a broader set of lifelong and life-wide goals of adults and communities. The two key concepts here are lifelong and life-wide (pp. 48-49) . . .

. . . We should position this reform as adding to rather than replacing existing WIOA programs. With their narrow and short-term focus on employment, WIOA programs are part of a workforce development system that helps meet the needs of many adults in the workforce and their employers. This serves an important function in our economy and society.

We nevertheless need public funding for other kinds of adult basic skills programs organized in a lifelong and life-wide framework. It is essential that this expansion to the adult education system is made through an evidence-based process from the very beginning, systematically addressing questions about program design and quality in terms of adult students' long-term outcomes. It might be helpful to have a federal office or agency overseeing the implementation and evaluation of these lifelong and life-wide adult education programs. We may need both public and private funding to support the basic and applied research that can drive the evidence-based system.

By broadening the lens on program outcomes in these ways, I hope some of the optimism and activism of an earlier era of adult literacy education can re-emerge and find traction in a more expansive system of adult education with a lifelong and life-wide focus on individuals' life outcomes. (p. 52).

In 2000, the New Jersey Association for Lifelong Learning issued "A Balancing Act: Learner Needs Versus Policy Requirements," a summary of what sixty adult educators and policy discussed at a daylong Leadership Institute on April 13, 2000:

Although there was no absolute consensus on the many issues discussed, summarized below are common themes raised during this event:

• New Jersey has several types of adult education programs, including basic literacy, GED and high school diploma, English as a second language, and work-related adult education programs. Participants in these programs come with a wide range of backgrounds, skill levels, needs, and interests. These diverse learners

require a well-organized system of services which enable learners to move to higher levels of skill and opportunity.

• *Federal (especially the Workforce Investment Act and National Reporting System) and state (e.g., New Jersey's new state plan for adult education)* policies are pushing adult education programs to help learners either get, retain, or move up in a job; help their children with their schoolwork; or earn a GED or high school diploma. *These policies have emerged in response to a number of economic, social, and political trends.*

• *These new policies are not always in sync with the outcomes that learners need to, hope to, or can realistically achieve*. *Policy makers and practitioners must get to know the adult learners they are trying to serve, so adult education services can be focused on what learners really need and want.*

• *Many programs already feel overwhelmed* *trying to serve their learners with the limited resources and time available to them. The new policies could add additional burdens to programs. Some programs feel they will be forced to focus on irrelevant goals and gather and report irrelevant data, using inappropriate assessment tools. Rather than being seen as a means for improving programs,* *assessment might end up being seen by adult educators as irrelevant or as a distraction or threat*.

• *Policy makers must understand the constraints that adult learners and adult educators operate under*. *Learners and programs should be held to high standards. However, those standards must be relevant to learners' real needs and realistic, given the constraints that learners and programs face.* *It's not enough to set higher standards if learners continue to face obstacles which inhibit their success and programs lack the staff, facilities, and other tools needed to create high-quality programs*.

• *Experience around the United States suggests that there is in fact greater flexibility in the new federal policies than many adult educators might realize*. *Adult educators in New Jersey and other states need to work with adult learners and policy makers to clarify the actual motivations of learners and the potential outcomes of adult education. From there, they can develop intensive, high-quality learning opportunities and support services and assessment tools which are relevant to both learners and policy makers. Along with these improvements must come professional development opportunities to develop the expertise and numbers of adult education staff.*

• *This work has great potential for transforming our current adult education programs into a high-quality system characterized by intensive, relevant, effective*

instruction and support services. It will require a <u>commitment</u> by adult educators and policy makers, forums (e.g., task forces, a state council, conferences) where these issues can be discussed further and new solutions developed (drawing on work done not only in New Jersey but in other state and national standards initiatives), and <u>an open-minded spirit of dialogue and continuous improvement.</u>

• Adult education is an under-recognized, under-supported field. <u>Those who believe in lifelong learning need to become advocates and educate policy makers</u> and others about the needs -- and potential -- of adult learners and adult education. <u>This is why it is important for us to identify relevant goals and to develop effective assessment and evaluation tools. This will let us document both (a) what our learners and programs are achieving and (b) what needs to be in place for learners and adult education programs to succeed</u>.

In 1994, **the Adult Literacy Special Interest Group of the International Reading Association** hosted a multi-part discussion in three issues of its newsletter on the definitions and pros and cons of two broad approaches to workplace basic education: "functional context" and "general literacy." This discussion was organized by Dolores Perin and featured Paul Jurmo, Larry Mikulecky, and Eunice Askov. Key points raised include:

- Some observers of the U.S. workplace literacy field argue that there are two approaches to this work: the "functional context" approach (which focuses on particular uses of work-related literacy that learners need to master) and the "general literacy" approach (in which learners develop more general types of literacy skills using fairly standardized curricula). Those favoring the former approach argue that it more efficiently responds to the needs and interests of employers and workers in that the worker-learners are developing skills that they can put to work quickly and further refine through application to authentic tasks they encounter in their jobs.

- Some observers, however, feel that this is a "false dichotomy" in that there are actually a variety of ways to help learners develop skills that they can apply in work and other life contexts. These include "participatory" (aka, "learner centered" or "worker-centered") models in which learners are involved in identifying their learning needs, participate actively in learning activities (rather than as passive recipients), and develop relevant skills that they are more likely to use – and further develop – in meaningful work and other life roles. Proponents of such participatory (learner-centered, worker-centered) models argue that, if functional context" programs are top-down in how they are conceived, planned, and carried out (and don't adequately involve the learners themselves in the process), the resulting programs are liable to be irrelevant and uninteresting to learners.

- Effective workplace education programs not only need relevant, engaging curricula but well-equipped program designers, teachers, and administrators and adequate "time on task" (in classroom activities, in homework, and in workplace and other life contexts) for learners to develop, practice, reflect on, and further build their skills). Too often these key ingredients are overlooked.

- These issues are complex ones that can't be adequately resolved in a few newsletter articles. They require more robust, ongoing discussion in which key ingredients of effective workplace literacy programs can be analyzed and summarized in ways that the field can use to support effective workplace education initiatives.

(View the link under Adult Literacy Special Interest Group in References below to read the full discussion.)

In 1992, the AFL-CIO and other labor organizations made the case for a "worker-centered" approach to worker training. **Anthony Sarmiento and Susan Schurman** (April 1992, p. 9) wrote:

> *While job-linked training has its place in an overall plan for economic development, it must be worker-centered, reflect an equal partnership between the union and employer, and be situated in a more comprehensive view of the future. . . (But) Exactly how do we achieve our vision of an equitable workplace and society? There are important lessons to be learned by recalling how management practices have changed in the past. How did workers come to enjoy a forty-hour work week, safer working conditions, paid sick leave and vacations, retirement and health insurance? A better understanding of how these workplace improvements were obtained might indicate how training opportunities for workers might be expanded. . . Perhaps we need to become more literate about workplace change as we promote workplace literacy programs.*

In September,1992, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education issued *Workplace Education: Voices from the Field*. The report summarized key points that emerged from discussions among representatives of 39 workplace literacy projects funded under the National Workplace Literacy Program. The participants focused on the following themes (critical issues) that they had identified as important for workplace literacy programs to consider (Evaluation Research, pp. 7-9):

> Theme #1: Establishing a strong partnership between business or labor organizations and education providers is a key step in developing an effective workplace literacy program.

Theme #2: Developing a relevant contextualized curriculum is important for project success. Curricula must be developed systematically, based on an analysis of learner and partner (employer and labor union) needs and strengths, focusing on skills that learners can apply to changing workplace realities and across industries.

Theme #3: Recruitment and retention efforts should be strategic, based on an understanding of factors that support or inhibit learner participation, and include incentives for workers to participate. Educators need special preparation to understand how to make programs relevant and engaging in the workplace contexts they will operate in.

Theme #4: Assessment and evaluation of work-based programs are challenging, and new evaluation and assessment resources are needed.

Theme #5: Worker involvement is central to success. Workers must be involved in developing goals, policies, and practices and monitoring activities to continuously improve programs. "When workers have a meaningful role in the program and its evaluation, they are more likely to feel a sense of ownership and work hard to make the program succeed."

For more about the perspectives on "AFE for Work" and other purposes for AFE, see Book 3 of "In Community, Strength: Changing Our Minds about U.S. Adult Foundational Education" (https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/4b259097-f77f-4c70-813c-4cff11dc6161/downloads/Community-Oriented%20AFE%201-pager%2011-2-23.pdf?ver=1723056522403 .)

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Message #5

Voices for Community as a Venue and Goal for Adult Foundational Education

September 29, 2024

Many AFE practitioners who worked with particular learner populations in their communities have advocated for a "community-oriented" or "community-based" approach to AFE that they described in these ways:

In "Adult Literacy and the Work of Community Building," **Erik Jacobson** (**2022**) wrote that the nature of AFE programs is "shaped by the work of the people committed to building them. (Thus) the concept of community has long been central . . . and is deployed in a number of different ways" (p.11). Programs were "organized around a collaborative decision-making process . . . explicitly intended to give students a role in the running of the program" (pp. 12-13). Community is also seen in AFE "groups who share certain goals and have similar needs. Once organized, they can advocate on their own behalf" (p.13).

I**n a presentation for the National Alliance of Urban Literacy Coalitions, Margaret Doughty and Raymond Hart** (**2005**, slide 4) said that Community Literacy . . .

- . . . is the practice of incorporating literacy into all community initiatives to build healthy neighborhoods, strong economies, and successful families. . .
- . . . creates a discourse around shared problem solving to promote the vision of 100 percent literacy through 100 percent community engagement. . .
- . . . allows people and organizations to do together what they cannot do alone.

Writing for the Center for Literacy Studies at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, Juliet Merrifield, Connie White, and Mary Beth Bingman(1994, Abstract) described how AFE can support democratic community development:

Literacy programs that would build communities not only teach specific basic skills, but also provide opportunities for students to learn teamwork, leadership, problem solving, critical thinking, and decision making in a democratic environment.

In a monograph for the ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Continuing, and Vocational Education, Hanna Arlene Fingeret (**1992**, p.13) said community-oriented (versus individually-oriented) AFE emphasizes critical reflection and action. Curricula reflect . . .

"community residents' concerns, such as jobs, housing, childcare, transportation, care for the elderly, and crime." In participatory activities . . . "students work as partners with literacy workers to . . . (tailor services) to their needs and . . . backgrounds" while supporting learners to also work with their communities to develop a better quality of life for everyone." "Communities" can include "classroom," "geographical," or "cultural" communities.

The Business Council for Effective Literacy (**April 1986,** p.1) said community-based organizations are ". . . the agents most successful in reaching and teaching those most in need of help. . . (They) bring about a larger change within individuals and the greater community. . . A common thread (is) 'empowerment'. . . to equip individuals (with) more control over their own lives."

Nina Wallerstein proposed (**January 1984**, Abstract) "community literacy . . . in which the curriculum is derived from the needs of students and in which students and teachers are actively engaged in the process of learning and community development . . . Because literacy is only one of the many problems adults face, other supportive services should be provided; community sites for satellite centers should be developed; in addition, literacy instruction should be incorporated into existing community programs."

The Association for Community Based Education (1983, pp. 11-12**)** stated: "Literacy for a broader social purpose is a major theme in community-based literacy education . . . it concentrate(s) on the whole learner . . . helping (learners) to develop 'human,' 'economic,' 'social,' and 'political' literacy, as well as the technical ability to encode and decode written language."

For more about the perspectives on "Community as a Venue and Goal for Adult Foundational Education" and other purposes for AFE, see Book 3 of "In Community, Strength: Changing Our Minds about U.S. Adult Foundational Education" (https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/4b259097-f77f-4c70-813c-4cff11dc6161/downloads/Community-Oriented%20AFE%201-pager%2011-2-23.pdf?ver=1723056522403 .)

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Message #6

Voices for Stronger Families

October 6, 2024

Though "AFE for work" has been a major focus of much of AFE (adult foundational education) in the U.S. for decades, another very important purpose for AFE has been "family literacy." This message #6 describes diverse ways that "family literacy" has been interpreted in the U.S. AFE field.

 AFE as a tool for intergenerational literacy

Family (aka, intergenerational or "2Gen") literacy programs have typically been defined as AFE services – often carried out with other partners like K-12 schools -- that focus on helping both parents (adult caregivers) and their children to develop basic skills and other strengths they need to succeed in lifelong learning and other life roles.

 Early work in family/intergenerational literacy pointed to the need to integrate adult basic skills education with early childhood education, a specialized and complex endeavor that required a different way of doing adult education (Business Council for Effective Literacy, April 1989.a. and April 1989.b; Nickse, 1990; Sticht, 1983). Such programs were seen as helping children, parents, and the family as a whole in a number of ways. These include strengthening children's ability to succeed in school and in their adult lives, improving the literacy and other skills adults need as parents and in other roles, strengthening bonds among family members and between families and their communities, among others (Clymer, Toso, Grinder, & Sauder, January 2017; Gadsden, 2006; Gadsden, 2017; Peyton, 2007; Sticht, Fall 2011, Sticht & McDonald, January 1989).

Since the 1980s, support for this concept of intergenerational literacy has come from diverse (and often collaborating) sources and taken a number of forms as shown in the following examples:

> **The Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy** was launched at a special White House luncheon on March 6, 1989 by Barbara Bush, wife of newly-elected U.S. President, George H.W. Bush. Its mission was to promote adult literacy in the United States, with a special focus on family literacy (Business Council for Effective Literacy, April 1989a). For several years prior to starting the Foundation, Mrs. Bush had – as wife of the then-Vice President Bush -- already been advocating for the issue to leaders in government, business, and in the nonprofit world (e.g.,

women's groups) (Business Council for Effective Literacy, July 1987 and April 1989b). Other First Ladies at the state level (e.g., in Virginia) (Business Council for Effective Literacy, January 1990b) followed Mrs. Bush's lead and took on similar roles as adult literacy advocates.

The National Center for Family Literacy was established in August, 1989 under the directorship of Sharon Darling, also the director of the Kenan Family Literacy Project and former Director of Adult and Community Education in Kentucky (Business Council for Effective Literacy, October 1989c). She had pioneered a family literacy model called the Parent and Child Education (PACE) program when head of adult education in Louisville. The National Center for Family Literacy, based in Louisville, collaborated with Mrs. Bush's office and other stakeholders; secured funding from the William R. Kenan, Jr. Charitable Trust, Toyota, and other sources; developed and field-tested models of family literacy programs around the U.S.; and hosted conferences around the U.S. NCFL guided the inclusion of family literacy and NCFL's four-component, two-generation model into the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act in 1998.

Fast forward a decade: The Center was renamed the **National Center for Families Learning** in 2013 and has evolved from its original model to one that now "builds upon the organization's legacy work and charts a new course. Moving beyond isolated programmatic endeavors, NCFL's vision will drive work designed to support the establishment of coordinated and aligned family learning systems in communities." Its "NCFL 60x30 Vision" is "By 2030, coordinated and aligned family learning systems are established in 60 communities, built with and for families, to increase education and economic outcomes, thereby creating more equitable communities." In 2018, the U.S. Department of Education selected NCFL to lead the establishment of Statewide Family Engagement Centers (https://www.familieslearning.org).

The Even Start Family Literacy Program was a federally-funded intergenerational literacy initiative that began in the early 1990s (Business Council for Effective Literacy, January 1988 and January 1989b), with funding steadily winding down in the first decade of the 2000s. (It was closed in 2012.) Even Start's stated purpose was to "integrate early childhood education, adult literacy (adult basic and secondary-level education and instruction for English language learners), parenting education, and interactive parent and child literacy activities for low-income families" families. The ending of Even Start funding led to a significant decrease in family literacy programs. "Despite this significant lack of federal and state financial support, a committed family literacy community remains. This community has been inventive in cobbling together scare resources to sustain vibrant family literacy initiatives and programs" (Clymer et al, January 2017, p. 1).

The Goodling Center for Research in Family Literacy was established in 2001 within the Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy, which had been founded in 1985 at Pennsylvania State University. The Center was named after Congressman William Goodling, a former school official and teacher who had been a major advocate in Congress for the Even Start program. The Center was funded by a $6 million endowment from his colleagues in Congress when Mr. Goodling retired. Since its inception, the Center has supported family literacy programs through research, professional development, and advocacy (https://ed.psu.edu/research-grants/centers-institutes/goodling-institute and https://eric.ed.gov/?q=source%3A%22Goodling+Institute+for+Research+in+Family+Literacy%22).

Broadening the scope of how AFE can support stronger families

Specialists in community-based programs and other areas of AFE (e.g., correctional education) have argued that AFE programs (typically integrated with other services) can respond to a wide range of important family needs (e.g., domestic violence, family cohesion, community integration, substance abuse, motherhood, childcare and eldercare, housing, transportation, women's changing roles, prisoner re-entry) beyond "intergenerational literacy." Examples of such models are described below:

During the COVID-19 pandemic, AFE programs of all types nationwide struggled to understand how they could deal with the fact that many programs were closing (at least temporarily) and learners couldn't attend face-to-face classes (due to fear of contagion and the fact that they had to stay home to take care of children and possibly other family members, including elders). Family literacy programs also faced these challenges. In response, some family programs created new on-line classes and other supports that allowed students to continue to meet remotely. While potentially a promising new way to make AFE more accessible to learners, on-line learning also posed new problems such as learners who had limited access to and the skills required to use computers and Internet service. AFE staff likewise had to develop their own capacities (skills, equipment, Internet service, budgets) to serve learners remotely, and funders and policy makers also needed to figure out how to support a very different way of providing AFE (Belzer, Leon, Patterson, Salas-Isnardi, Vanek, & Webb, August 2022; McLean, 2021).

John Gordon and Dianne Ramdeholl (2010) described how the Open Book program (1985 to 2002) in New York City supported leadership by women:

Most . . . students who played key leadership roles were women. . . . Many women in abusive relationships came to the Open Book. Many . . . wrote and talked about their experiences with domestic violence and the

importance of the school as a source of support . . . The school gained a reputation as a safe space and a resource for women struggling for autonomy and freedom in their lives (p.33).

In the later 1990s, the National Institute for Literacy supported family-related AFE through its Equipped for the Future (EFF) adult education systems reform initiative which, among other things, identified "family member" as one of three life roles for which adults needed basic skills. EFF advocated for AFE programs to use participatory, contextualized curricula customized to the particular real-world roles that learners play. (The other two roles were "worker" and "community member." For more about how EFF defined the family member role, see Stein, 2000, p. 10.)

Hanna Arlene Fingeret (**1992**, p.13) said community-oriented (versus individually-oriented) AFE emphasizes critical reflection and action. Curricula reflect . . . "community residents' concerns, such as jobs, housing, childcare, transportation, care for the elderly, and crime." In participatory activities . . . "students work as partners with literacy workers to . . . (tailor services) to their needs and . . . backgrounds" while supporting learners to also work with their communities to develop a better quality of life for everyone." "Communities" can include "classroom," "geographical," or "cultural" communities.

In Making Meaning, Making Change **(1992), Elsa Auerbach** advocated for an alternative kind of family/parent literacy different from the common version that focused on helping parents use school-based educational practices with their children. Her proposed participatory and collaborative model helped learners build on family strengths and investigate how they view and use literacy for positive change within the contexts they live in (pp. 8-9). In language experience activities, English language learners wrote about how they collaborated with their children to practice English and why (i.e., many household tasks) they didn't have time to do their homework (pp. 7-9). They developed family trees, described significant objects and photos, and mapped their neighborhoods to identify contexts where they needed English (pp. 43-44).

In New York City in the 1980s, the American Reading Council's Mothers Reading Program began with the hope it would provide literacy services to mothers of young children. However, because young mothers tended to have childcare and other life problems (e.g., marital separations, disruptive family lives, and relationships with substance abusers), it became clear that it would be difficult to recruit and retain enough such learners. "There was also a prevailing notion that women don't have a right to help themselves until their children are grown." For these reasons, the program was opened to women of any age, from any part of the

city, and regardless of whether they were mothers (Jurmo, 1987, pp. 277-278). The coordinator began the classes in the rectory of an East Harlem Catholic parish. The classes initially focused on the broad issues of "motherhood and womanhood." As these themes were discussed, new themes emerged. The coordinator observed that such learner-generated themes "are inexhaustible because there is always something going on in their lives and in their inner lives." Class members might be asked to describe their views or their experience of a particular issue. The coordinator would record key phrases on the blackboard and review the written language with the students. Students alternated individual work with group discussions, helping each other out when working on individual reading or writing. Students particularly enjoyed writing their own autobiographies because, as one student put it, "It's something we want so badly to write down" (p. 279).

From its start in Philadelphia in the 1970s, the Lutheran Settlement House (LSH) Women's Program was designed to implement Paulo Freire's ideas in an American context (Jurmo, 1987). Staff hoped to enhance learner self-esteem and empowerment and involve the community in ways that were "non-racist and non-imperialistic" (p. 264). Staff balanced students' desire to achieve discrete goals such as "passing the GED" with other valuable activities like discussing or writing about important issues (e.g., work, family violence, oral histories, women's changing roles). The latter focus enabled students to express themselves "to the people in charge" (p. 269). Positive messages (like how some women have escaped from abusive situations) showed learners "what they can accomplish despite obstacles . . . society has erected in their path" (p.269). A teacher noted: "These are issues . . . [students] are thinking about anyway, so you might as well come out into the open about them" (p. 270). Reflecting on the program's mission, one staff member asked: "Are we developing community leaders—people who go from here to become active in their churches, communities, and community agencies—with better skills perhaps than before they came in?" (pp. 265-266).

These diverse initiatives to support family literacy have demonstrated the importance of family literacy at the community level; the need to customize programs to the needs, interests, and strengths of learners and their communities; and the potential of collaborative capacity building for a particular segment of the AFE field. Though reduced, supports for family literacy have continued when similar efforts to support workplace literacy, corporate involvement, learner leadership, urban AFE, and other segments of the field have faded and much of the previous good work they did has been lost and is no longer used. Much of family literacy's continued viability and success is due to strong leadership, sustained support from committed funders, and solid models that are relevant to a major segment of U.S. communities.

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Message #7

Voices for Individuals and Communities Impacted by the Criminal Justice System

October 10, 2024

Though "AFE for work" has been a major focus of much of AFE (adult foundational education) in the U.S. for decades, another very important purpose for AFE has been AFE for individuals with criminal records (i.e., people currently incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, and never-incarcerated but nonetheless having a "criminal record.") This message #7 describes diverse ways that this area of AFE has been interpreted in the U.S. AFE field. It is offered as a resource to those looking for new ways to strengthen and expand AFE opportunities for U.S. adult learners and communities.

Evolving approaches to AFE for individuals and communities impacted by the criminal justice system

Prisons and other institutions (e.g., re-entry organizations serving formerly-incarcerated individuals) have historically provided various kinds of education and training programs to adults and youth who are incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, convicted of a crime but not imprisoned, or at risk of criminal behavior (Chlup, August 2005a). These programs have included various types of "basic skills" instruction, such as "GED classes," "English for Speakers of Other Languages" (ESOL), and basic literacy, as well as technical training classes in which work-related math, reading, and writing are integrated with the teaching of other skills and knowledge required for particular jobs. (For the purposes of this article, I will refer to these various types of programs as "re-entry foundational education programs.")

These re-entry foundational education programs are typically provided with the assumption that they will help learners develop skills, attitudes, credentials (e.g., a high school equivalency diploma), and other assets (e.g., support systems) they need to get a job, advance in their education, integrate back into their communities and families, and avoid returning to criminal behavior and incarceration. Many of these programs have used standardized curricula taken from adult education or high school programs. Such standardized curricula often teach skills "out-of-context" (e.g., the memorizing of random vocabulary words, drilling in "times tables") in ways that are not directly related to real-world applications of those skills that are meaningful and motivating to learners.

 Drawing on experience in such programs and research in adult foundational education more generally, some education programs for individuals who are incarcerated, formerly-

incarcerated, convicted of a crime but not imprisoned, or at risk of criminal behavior have tried to make basic skills activities relevant and engaging for learners by contextualizing instruction around themes and uses of literacy taken from learners' lives. Writing classes might, for example, have learners write about personally-relevant themes like "my family," "my goals," life in prison, and strategies for dealing with challenges and opportunities they will face upon release. Reading activities might include reading of texts written by former inmates or on issues (e.g., health problems, civil rights of people with criminal records, how to help children of incarcerated individuals succeed in education and life more generally) that particularly impact incarcerated individuals and their communities and families. Digital literacy classes might help learners navigate various online systems that can help them deal with health, legal, transportation, or housing needs. Math activities might focus on how to manage one's budget and make wise consumer decisions (financial literacy) or on occupational math needed for particular jobs.

As Sandra Kerka wrote for the ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education (1995, p. 1):

> *Successful prison literacy programs are learner-centered and participatory. They put literacy into meaningful contexts and motivate and sustain learner interest by providing engaging topics. Literacy programs should be tailored to the prison culture.*

In addition to using the above kinds of contextualized curricula, some re-entry foundational education programs have recognized that "lack of basic skills" or "lack of a high school diploma" are just some of the obstacles that make it difficult for inmates to lead productive lives outside prison. Other obstacles might include employers reluctant to hire former inmates, landlords who don't want to rent to "ex-cons," health problems, learning disabilities, reliance on social networks that reinforce former inmates' negative behaviors and attitudes, racial discrimination, lack of ability to vote or get a driver's license, lack of the "social skills" and other tools (e.g., clothing, a car, digital access and devices) expected by mainstream society, and lack of positive moral and practical supports from former inmates' families and communities. To help learners deal with those obstacles, some re-entry foundational education programs work – "integrate" -- with other service providers (e.g., healthcare, legal, transportation, housing) to help learners access and benefit from those services while they also work on their basic skills and educational credentials.

Some re-entry-related programs also see education as a tool for "empowering" learners to be active, informed problem-solvers, critical thinkers, and leaders who can manage their lives effectively upon release. Learners thereby avoid being passive recipients of help from others and subject to obstacles that life puts in their way.

Advocates for re-entry foundational education programs argue that well-designed, well-supported programs can not only help the learners involved but have positive impacts on the various types of communities that learners interact with (Goebel, August 2005). Arguments include:

- Re-entry foundational education can strengthen learners' families by:
  - helping parents better support their children's academic success, health, and overall well-being;
  - building families' economic security by helping parents secure family-sustaining employment and manage their financial and in-kind resources;
  - helping parents serve as positive role models for all family members;
  - helping adults provide positive home environments for older family members and members who have disabilities;
  - helping parents access and use various kinds of support systems and tools (e.g., digital technologies) that they and other family members can benefit from.
- Re-entry foundational education programs can help other communities that learners interact with including:
  - workplaces that need qualified, reliable workers;
  - providers of healthcare, legal, housing, transportation, recreation, digital access, consumer, banking, cultural, environmental, and other services that need well-equipped participants;
  - labor unions who want to help their current or prospective members (who might include individuals with criminal records) succeed and recognize the negative social and economic impacts of incarceration and crime;
  - libraries that want to welcome and serve community members who want to learn and improve their lives;
  - K-12 schools that want to serve and involve parents and other care-givers of children and youth;
  - public safety agencies that want to ensure the safety and security of all residents;
  - economic development agencies that recognize that a positive local economy depends on a well-equipped workforce and consumer base, social cohesion, and public safety;
  - public policy makers who recognize not only the negative social and economic implications of crime and incarceration but want to maximize the efficiency of uses of public dollars currently being invested in police and prisons.

Examples of re-entry foundational education services

Shown below are examples of various types of re-entry foundational education services, along with links to resources that readers can access for further ideas and information.

The Bard Prison Initiative is a collaboration of Bard College and maximum- and minimum-security prisons in New York State. Inmates earn college degrees in a rigorous bachelor's program taught by college faculty. See the four-hour PBC documentary titled "College Behind Bars" at https://www.pbs.org/kenburns/college-behind-bars

Bunker Hill Community College and the Suffolk County House of Correction in Boston have operated a re-entry education program for the jail's inmates. In a Writing Workshop, learners developed writing skills by writing stories taken from their lives. One inmate, William, wrote and then read to the class his "My Own Prison" piece in which he . . .

> *. . . recounted his search for a place to live when he was homeless, with several students underlining sentences and scrawling notes on their copies. William finished and looked from his piece to the class. "That's great, man," (fellow student) Damon said. "I could really see what's happenin.'' Like when you describe the place your friend showed you." Damon flipped the pages of his copy to find the exact part. He read it aloud. "'It was a drab looking building made of yellow brick and covered with dirt and grime. We walked up the stairs of this morbid looking building and we stepped inside. The hallways were dark and dank. The smell of urine bouncing off the walls made it hard to breathe.' I could see that, man. I could smell that." William smiled (Smith, August 2005, p. 1).*

The Fortune Society is a New York City non-profit founded in 1967 as an outgrowth of an Off-Broadway play. It provides multiple services to nearly 7000 incarcerated and formerly-incarcerated individuals per year. In addition to job development, healthcare, housing, nutrition, and family services, Fortune's education program uses a participatory approach to help returnees achieve personal and professional goals. Topics include basic literacy and math, computer skills, preparation for the high school equivalency exam, transition to higher education, and job skills and career exploration. In one innovative example of project-based learning, learners in a computer animation class learned how to make short films around personally-relevant issues (and thereby meet several learning objectives at once). Classes are taught by dedicated professional teachers and volunteers (including for several years undergraduate students participating in a service learning course at nearby New York University.) Visit https://fortunesociety.org/category/education/

In the Minnesota Correctional Facility in Stillwell, MN, the Critical Poetry Project (Geraci, August 2005) helped inmates "learn to study poetry critically and improve their writing and public speaking skills" (p. 15). A literacy instructor explained:

> *I hoped poetry would have value as a tool for creating community and unity among diverse groups of male offenders; I wanted it to enhance the social interaction between racial and ethnic populations in order to reduce conflict. I wanted poetry to help students learn how to attain and improve their academic skills and cultivate positive attitudes about themselves. . . During a planning workshop, the inmates submitted themes that interested them: manhood, fatherhood, American dreams and nightmares, and the value of a man or woman (p. 17).*

Another instructor said:

> *We have a community providing for, nurturing for, and caring for one another. It's not just about writing but caring for each other's problems (p. 18).*

The first instructor cited above added:

> *Students learn a broad array of writing skills. They learn to organize their thoughts and express them creatively. Not only do they improve on grammar and spelling but they also increase their vocabulary. The learn to use the rhyming dictionary, hip-hop dictionary, and thesaurus. Students can incorporate what they learn about history and political science into their poems (p. 19).*

A student commented:

> *We built a community of guys who otherwise would never have talked to each other (p. 20).*

The Bedford Hills (NY) Correctional Facility offers college-prep (writing and math) and degree programs to women inmates, through a partnership with **Marymount Manhattan College.** Students have access to books, supplies, a computer lab, library, and study area. Reflecting the College's commitment to providing a rich college experience, Bedford students are offered multiple academic and extracurricular activities, including guest speakers, skills enhancement workshops, Read Arounds (where they share their creative work),

poetry slams, exhibits of students' art, and a student-written newsletter distributed to all inmates.

The Learning Center in the Halawa Correctional Facility in Aiea, Hawaii integrated traditional and current cultural practices and values with basic skills. Learners read stories about Hawai'i written by a Hawai'ian author and learned traditional dances. They discussed how they used math in their current lives "on the streets" and could serve as better role models for their children. One teacher described how useful it was for her to have grown up in the same public housing that many of her students did, as it helped her understand where the learners were coming from and enhanced her credibility with them. She described how involving inmates in hula classes forced them to stretch themselves—their bodies and their minds —in new ways. "In my class I have the gangs. Knock on wood, I've never had a problem. When you're in my class you're a dancer, nobody but a dancer." She added: "Any culture can do what we do here. It's important for you to know who you are, so that others can understand you" (Garner, August 2005, pp. 13-15).

A Vermont Law created an independent school – known as the **Community High School of Vermont (CHSVT)** within the Department of Corrections and approved by the state Department of Education that can award secondary school credits and high school diplomas. The state legislature was concerned that incarcerated individuals – especially the large numbers of youth 17 to 22 years old – did not have access to the free public education guaranteed as a basic civil right in Vermont's constitution. Features of CHSVT include: 47 full-time and 350 part-time teachers across nine correctional facilities . . . additional educational services provided in probation and parole sites to learners after they are released from prison . . . a requirement to complete 20 credits in a full high school curriculum . . . individual graduation plans customized to the interests, needs, and schedules of students to guide them through the learning process . . . learner involvement in choosing courses to take . . . options for learner to "earn a GED" (seen as a limited though useful outcome) and to "earn (the more desirable) high school diploma" . . . use of various strategies (respect, ongoing feedback, confidentiality, building on learners' prior knowledge) to build student motivation . . . rewarding learners for demonstrated achievements rather than for mere attendance . . . and an open entry/open exit approach which allows learners to participate in various short modules without having to do them in a rigid, standardized sequence (Woods, August 2005).

In 2007, inspired by the Fortune Society model (described above), staff of **Union County College** in New Jersey secured a foundation grant to create a prisoner re-

entry initiative. Called "RISE" (for "Return, Improve, Serve, Excel"), the project was a collaboration of UCC, the Nicholson Foundation, local partners (e.g., a non-profit re-entry service provider, a state-funded day-reporting center, country human services), and state-level organizations (e.g., parole board, a community college network.)

UCC took the lead in (a) a county re-entry task force (where stakeholders met monthly to share information and strategies); (b) job-related basic skills and computer classes and job development for clients of the day-reporting center; (c) enrolling returnees in GED and credit courses; (d) training partner staff in re-entry issues; (e) awareness-raising activities (e.g., a day-long re-entry conference, a video, pamphlets); and (f) writing of funding proposals for re-entry services. College staff also participated in state-level meetings where re-entry strategies were shared, with special emphasis on community college roles. RISE was later re-named (to "Reconnections") and transferred to the local United Way and then to the county workforce office. It continued providing re-entry services in the county's two employment centers, with county funding.

A teacher wrote about her first prison teaching experience, at **the Valhalla's Women's Jail in New York State (Chlup, August 2005, p.30)**:

> *I did not have experience as an adult educator on the outside to compare this against until I later taught courses in more "traditional" adult education settings. And while the similarities are great, the differences are indeed striking. My inmate learners were not allowed to know my last name or any other personal information about me. I had to monitor the amount of paper that I distributed. (Students are permitted only a certain area of square footage in their cells to be occupied by paper. When they exceed this amount, they must either mail the excess to an individual on the outside for safekeeping or risk having it destroyed should it be found during an unannounced inspection.) I was never allowed to leave pens with my students, making it nearly impossible to assign written homework. All of the supplies I brought into the jail had to be accounted for before I left. The corrections officers once kept my students an extra 20 minutes as the class searched for a missing pen. It had simply rolled away from the table at which we had been working and another student inmate had picked it up, thinking it belonged to her group . . .*
>
> *. . . I held class alongside five other teachers in the jail's gymnasium. A less than ideal working space: a chair was always being scraped across the floor, and when one group was writing it seemed as if another was always reading aloud. It was never quiet, but it was also never dull. Spanish and English flew through the air from woman to woman and the energy was*

something palpable. That first job was the one that called me into teaching. It is the continual thrill, joy, and reward of working with inmates that helps keep me there.

These diverse re-entry foundational education programs demonstrate both the importance of serving individuals impacted by the criminal justice system, as well as various strategies (partnerships, curricula, funding) for doing so. Such education can have important benefits for learners and their families and communities. Given the huge numbers of individuals in the U.S. who have criminal records, this form of education should be a key component of high-quality U.S. adult foundational education systems.

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OTHER RESOURCES

JFF (Jobs for the Future) webinar: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvWVNw2siK0

LINCS Collection and Discussion Group on Correctional and Re-Entry Education: https://lincs.ed.gov/resource-collection?keys=&field_topic_target_id%5B7537%5D=7537

Open Door Collective publications:

· "What Re-Entry Services Can Do to Strengthen the Basic Skills of Former Inmates": https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/4b259097-f77f-4c70-813c-4cff11dc6161/downloads/ODC%20Re-Entry%20Services%20Can-Do%2012-10-18.pdf?ver=1723056520601
· "Foundational Skills Education as a Fundamental Right of Incarcerated and Reentering Adults": https://www.literacymn.org/odc/Foundational-Skills-Education-Foundational-Right-Incarcerated

"College Behind Bars" documentary by Ken Burns aired on PBS: https://www.pbs.org/video/extended-trailer-college-behind-bars-tgcpfu/?utm_source=bestofpbsnewsletter&utm_medium=emai

"Last Week Tonight" episode in which John Oliver talks about prisoner re-entry: https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=gJtYRxH5G2k

Voices for Adult Learners as Problem Solvers and Leaders

October 11, 2024

For decades, adult educators in the United States and other countries have made the case for adult foundational education (AFE) as a tool for equipping learners to be problem-solvers and leaders. Presented below are examples of those arguments, followed by examples of programs and other initiatives that have focused on building learner problem-solving and leadership capacities.

Arguments for AFE as a tool for learner problem-solving and leadership

(This section draws on *Learners as Leaders for Stronger Communities: Renewing Participatory Learning, Learner Leadership, and U.S. Adult Foundational Education: https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/4b259097-f77f-4c70-813c-4cff11dc6161/downloads/Learners%20as%20Leaders%20final%20-Jurmo%203-27-23.pdf?ver=1723056522489 .)*

In the 1980s, a segment of the adult literacy field in the U.S. shifted toward a "participatory" or "learner-centered" approach which emphasized active learner participation in the learning process and, in some cases, the management of the program itself. These activities were designed to move learners from lower levels of participation (i.e., merely being physically present in a program, giving limited input into the content of programs, and/or being passive recipients of services provided by others) to higher levels of participation in which learners take on greater responsibility, control, and reward vis-a-vis their education. In these activities, learners performed roles that historically were carried out by program staff, volunteers, and others who were not students.

For learning activities, learners took on greater responsibility for planning (e.g., identifying their learning needs, setting goals), implementing (e.g., researching, writing, reading, and talking about personally relevant themes; role plays; project-based learning; helping teachers with instructional tasks; book clubs; creating learning materials such as student newsletters, learner stories, and letters sent to public officials), and monitoring (e.g., creating portfolios and otherwise assessing how they were doing) instructional activities. Similarly, some programs involved learners in management tasks traditionally carried out by staff. Learners helped with public awareness, public policy advocacy, learner recruitment and retention, providing peer support to fellow students, fundraising, outreach

to various kinds of community partners, facilities management, and evaluation and hiring of program staff.

Advocates for this approach saw it as a way to not only help learners develop basic (foundational) communication and problem-solving skills, but to also build other important assets such as self-efficacy, background knowledge, academic and other types of credentials, personal learning and life plans, and support systems they needed for the adult roles important to them. (Such roles included being parents, consumers, workers, union members, participants in various community institutions, and voters.)

Adult educators and adult learners and other partners developed this approach in:

- community-based organizations (CBOs, here defined as locally- controlled non-profit organizations that provided educational and other supports that helped community members deal effectively with personal and community challenges and opportunities);
- some programs affiliated with the two national volunteer adult literacy organizations of that time (i.e., Laubach Literacy Action and Literacy Volunteers of America, which eventually merged to form ProLiteracy);
- other types of organizations (such as labor unions, religious organizations, workplace literacy programs, prisoner re-entry programs, and adult basic skills programs based in public schools and community colleges that also developed learner-centered models).

Proponents of this approach were influenced in their thinking by a number of sources, including sociolinguistic research in how children learn to read and how adults learn, high performance organizational models, religious teachings, humanistic education, the communicative approach to foreign language instruction, community organizing around local issues, and the civil rights (social justice) movements in the U.S. and other countries.

Researchers identified the following potential benefits when learners took on greater responsibility for their learning:

- improve program efficiency by helping to make services more relevant, increasing learner motivation to persevere and support the programs, and attracting more learners and supports to the program;
- strengthen the personal development of learners by improving their self-efficacy, social and problem-solving skills, and achievement of personal work, family, civic, and lifelong learning goals; and/or

- support democratic social change by improving learners' ability to understand and deal effectively with social conditions negatively impacting their well-being and that of their families and communities.

One major focus of participatory AFE efforts was the development of what came to be known as learner leadership. AFE staff were recognizing that their programs could benefit if adult learners (current or former AFE students) took on active roles in "the 4 Rs" of recruitment and retention of learners, resource generation (through advocacy and fundraising), and reform (continuous improvement) of adult literacy services (through evaluation and other activities). At national, state, and local levels, learners were becoming spokespersons (to the media, public officials, private sector donors, and other audiences), serving on advisory committees, working as paid or unpaid staff, using their community networks to recruit learners, and providing peer support to fellow learners. Learners were increasingly given opportunities to participate in adult education conferences at national, state, and local levels – both as learners and as presenters. Learners provided advice to decision makers on why and how to use clear language when communicating electoral and healthcare information.

By the end of the 1990s, a national adult learner leadership organization, Voice of Adult Learners United for Education (VALUE) had been launched and continued for the next 25 years (with its name revised to "VALUEUSA"). Since 2000, participatory AFE and adult learner leadership have continued to be supported at national, state, and local levels, though generally in different forms, in different social and institutional contexts, and with different leaders than those involved in previous decades. Participatory education efforts received financial and in-kind supports from diverse AFE institutions and funders. (See Sondra Stein's 2000 description of the Equipped for the Future model of the National Institute for Literacy.)

Examples of AFE initiatives focused on equipping learners as problem-solvers and leaders

Presented below are brief examples of efforts by local adult education programs and other stakeholders to develop the above kinds of learner-centered/ participatory AFE. For more details of these and similar programs, see Book 4 of the *In Community, Strength: Changing Our Minds about U.S. Adult Foundational Education* series at https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/4b259097-f77f-4c70-813c-4cff11dc6161/downloads/CO%20Book%204%20Jurmo%20FINAL%2010-28-23.pdf?ver=1729788056412

The Open Book

As described by John Gordon and Dianne Ramdeholl (Winter 2010), the Open Book was a community adult literacy program housed in a Catholic school in Brooklyn from the mid-1980s to early 2000s. It began with a vision of helping people to "transform their lives and engage with others to bring about social change (p.28). It was the students who consistently articulated the idea of the school as community and its centrality in the Open Book's mission. And it was the students, through their actions, who made that community real. As Maria, one of those early students said:

> *What community means to me – to be there for others and to try to lift each other when we're down. Life is a community of caring and love and hope. My class is like that. It's a place where you can have friendship; you can feel warm and express who you are without being afraid to be you. There's an energy among each other, whatever we talk about. It could be family, kids, jobs, homeless also teachers, doctors, and sickness (p. 29).*

Students gave input related to class structure, attendance, and policies.

> *We tried to talk them out as best we could, aiming for some kind of informal consensus. . . (p.29). We began to have regular meetings of the school community. . . these meetings covered a wide range of issues, from the mundane to the far-reaching . . . keeping the space clean . . . ideas for new initiatives or applications for funding, a plan for students to evaluate teachers (p. 30).*

> *Most of the students who played key leadership roles were women . . . many women in abusive relationships came to the Open Book. Many of them wrote and talked about their experiences with domestic violence and the importance of the school as a source of support for them. In time, the school gained a reputation as a safe space and a resource for women struggling for autonomy and freedom in their lives P.33).*

Understanding Workers' Rights

Make the Road New Jersey (https://maketheroadnj.org) provides various supports to immigrants, including education and other activities related to worker rights.   In its ESOL education program, learners read and discuss statements on themes like "Respect and Dignity" for workers, integrate those related themes and vocabulary into practicing of subject/verb agreement, and listen to and then role-play a dialogue in which one learner asks another to sign a petition. Learners also practice writing a letter to their elected representatives.

Collaborative Learning for Continuous Improvement

Collaborative Learning for Continuous Improvement (CLCI) was a three-year demonstration project of the National Workplace Literacy Program funded by the U.S. Department of Education. At each site, a Planning and Evaluation Team was established, composed of outside educators, company representatives (from training, human resources, and production departments), and (in some cases) workers and union representatives. Each team carried out an initial Workplace Needs Assessment in which they identified one or more organizational problems to remediate with a workplace basic skills program.

In a General Motors factory, workers analyzed a complex, long-standing manufacturing problem. This process produced several outcomes: (a) well-thought-out solutions to persistent problems; (b) team-problem-solving skills that workers could continue using, and (c) a problem-solving course for future use. (See the Collaborative Learning for Continuous Improvement series:
Jurmo (19944a, 1994b, 1994c, 1994d, 1994e, 1994f, 1994g, August 1998).

Partnership Learning for Change

Literacy Volunteers of New York City (LVNYC) moved from fairly traditional one-to-one tutoring to a participatory approach to learning and leadership development. In a new "Intensive Program," eight carefully-prepared tutors led four learning groups with six learners in each. Though many of the learners initially resisted giving up their individual tutors. gradually the learners saw the benefit of being able to talk with other learners about literacy and learning, and life more generally.

These learning groups led to additional activities in which learners took on new responsibilities while gaining new skills. A student was hired to serve on staff as a liaison to other learners and to represent students in meetings with funders, new tutors, and the news media. This student in turn formed a student committee composed of two learners from each LVNYC site. The group went through a process of growth which included conflict and confusion about roles, responsibilities, and relationships of student leaders. Out of these efforts came new topics to be covered in the curriculum, including Black history, voter registration and education, and accuracy of AIDS-related information (Boutwell, 1989).

Community-Based Education in the Workplace

In *Community-Based Literacy Educators: Experts and Catalysts for Change,* Raul Añorve (1989) described how he developed workplace literacy programs in Southern California in the early 1980s. He worked with company managers to implement a "learner-centered" curriculum based on the knowledge participants already possessed, to strengthen workers' oral, reading, writing, analytical, and teamwork skills through active study of issues of direct concern to them. These included discrimination, labor laws, wages, union contracts, maternity leave, and promotions.

Añorve used ethnographic methods (e.g., photographing the workplace environment, talking with supervisors, reviewing company documents) to identify work processes and language uses. In class, workers analyzed themes and problems represented in the photos, developing critical thinking and communication skills while discussing both technical and social (e.g., racism, sexism) issues. He explained to managers that such discussions help clear the air about issues that can impact employee morale and performance. Añorve found that both managers and unions generally agreed on the value of this approach.

Problem-Posing at Work

In *ESL for Action: Problem-Posing at Work*, Elsa Roberts Auerbach and Nina Wallerstein (1987) adapted Paul Freire's problem-posing approach to AFE to create a participatory workplace English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) curriculum. Learners developed communication skills, positive attitudes, cultural sensitivity, and the ability to analyze and solve workplace problems. The curriculum was organized around work-related themes such as rules and responsibilities, health and safety, pay, overtime, stress, discrimination, communication with co-workers and supervisors, and worker rights. Resources related to legal and historical information and workplace stores are provided for teachers and students.

Community Health Partnerships in Lowell, MA

The Frederic Abisi Adult Education Center in Lowell, Massachusetts has partnered with local healthcare providers to offer health-related services to adult education students. Activities include workshops on various health topics (e.g., nutrition, stress and depression, oral health, health insurance, chronic disease self-management, and exercise) and health clinics conducted at the Adult Education Center. Center staff also receive training in mental health issues, to support learners in culturally appropriate ways and discuss mental health concepts in classes. Abisi Center also became a trusted hub for getting COVID-19 information and services (e.g., vaccinations provided by healthcare professionals) to learners. For more information, visit

and see Open Door Collective (March-May 2021).

Florida Health Literacy Initiative

The Florida Literacy Coalition (FLC) works with more than 300 health partners to provide health-related services to adult learners across the state. Activities include tours of health facilities, mock clinics at community health centers, exercise classes, counseling by health insurance navigators, and presentations. Student-run project-based learning activities include a health fair, first aid classes, a community garden, presentations by a sheriff's department about pedestrian safety, a "Biggest Loser" nutrition and weight loss contest, a fundraising walk for cancer research, and a health resources guide for immigrants. Visit and see Open Door Collective (March-May 2021).

Empowerment Health Education

Marcia Drew Hohn (1997) described an "empowerment health education" model developed by adult educators and learners in Massachusetts. A Student Action Health Team, composed of adult immigrant students, used participatory action research to identify three health-related problems of lower-skilled immigrants: poor readability of health materials, the need for educational activities in addition to reading materials, and inability of health educators to communicate with basic-skills-limited adults. The team then identified health topics relevant to learners (e.g., cancer, HIV/AIDS, smoking, nutrition, substance abuse, violence), developed a safe learning environment where learners' ideas and questions were respected, implemented a participatory curriculum, and analyzed workshop evaluations. This project-based learning helped both team members and other students to develop health-related knowledge and other skills (e.g., teamwork, facilitation, research, oral and written English).

An Investment Club for Adult Learners

In Washington, DC, the Academy of Hope (public charter school for adults) and Literacy Volunteers of America provided numeracy and financial planning lessons to participants in a workplace education program for District Department of Transportation road crews (Jackson, November 2004). In addition to learning how to calculate amounts of materials needed for paving jobs, participants learned how to manage personal budgets (including saving for retirement), compare life insurance plans, and track their investments' performance. This led the learners to create an Investment Club.

The program's responsiveness to learning goals relevant to learners was in keeping with the adult educators' learner-centered philosophy and was supported by the employer. In

the first class, the instructor asked the learners what they wanted to learn. The learners said they wanted to be able to manage math tasks they faced in their current jobs, in possible future jobs, and in their personal lives (e.g., buying a home, planning for retirement, making informed decisions about insurance and investments.) The program received support from a financial literacy course offered by a local bank and from the Literacy Advocate Institute (the State Education Agency's professional development program for adult educators.)

Roots of Success

Roots of Success is an "empowering environmental literacy and job training program that prepares youth and adults who have been failed by the education system to access jobs and career pathways in environmental fields and improve environmental and social conditions in their communities." It is used across the U.S. in diverse educational and job training programs, including incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals. Topics include many commonly found in AFE: environmental literacy, critical thinking, problem solving, decision making, collaboration, advocacy, civic engagement, career options, financial literacy, social entrepreneurship, leadership, information literacy, and public speaking. Visit https://rootsofsuccess.org .

Community in the Classroom in Appalachia

A "Community in the Classroom" project was operated in the early 1990s by the Center for Literacy Studies at the University of Tennessee (Merrifield et al, 1994). Project facilitators worked with ten Appalachian community–based organizations (CBOs) to explore "ways in which literacy education can build communities. But it has become clear that to contribute to the building of community, education must not only be in communities and by communities, but also for communities and educational methodologies and approaches must be different from dominant (traditional) forms. . . We knew we had to work together to design something new that must be rooted in the particular contexts in which we work" (p. 300).

To develop an alternative, community-focused model, each CBO was led through a three-part process to (a) prepare local teams; (b) carry out special projects focused on a particular need identified by the CBO; and (c) evaluate and reflect on what they achieved and learned in the project. One CBO, called "Concerned Citizens Against Toxic Waste," worked "to stop well water pollution from a nearby industrial site. As they have tried to organize their community, group members have found many people who lack the basic literacy skills to gain information about the environmental problem, and to be active in attempts to clean it up" (p. 307). The article concludes:

If we believe that it is not enough to educate people to compete for the same limited number of not-very-good jobs, then we must pay attention to what else education can do for our society. If we believe that diverse peoples can learn to live together, accept each other and work together toward common goals, then we must create opportunities for people to learn about each other, share common experiences and recognize commonalities as well as differences. If we want to hold on to our rural roots, then we must focus attention on building and rebuilding communities (p. 312).

In sum . . .

These diverse, creative AFE programs demonstrate the why's and how-to's of AFE that supports learner leadership and problem-solving. Such programs can help learners and their communities manage opportunities and challenges they face. This form of education should be a key component of high-quality U.S. adult foundational education systems that better serve more learners and communities.

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Message 9

Voices for the Ready, Willing, and Able to Learn

October 23, 2024

The importance of understanding both the limitations and strengths of adult learners

For decades, adult educators in the United States and other countries have made the case for adult foundational education (AFE) as a tool for serving individuals who are challenged in their abilities to perform desired work, family, and civic roles (Harman, May 1985; Nash,1999; Stein, 2000; Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy, April 2002; Morgan, Waite, & Diecuch, 2017; McHugh & Doxsee, 2018; Reder, Spring 2020; Rosen, October 2021). While those individuals are often defined by their "deficits" (i.e., what they are *not* able to do), a more useful and accurate description of who they are should also include the positive *strengths* that they can bring with them to AFE programs and to their communities.

Those strengths can include various types of technical and social skills and knowledge, positive motivation, support systems, credentials and certificates, and practical tools and resources to use to achieve learning and other life goals. In other words, learners should not be defined merely by their lack of reading or math skills, lack of a high school diploma, or limited fluency in English. While acknowledging particular limitations of learners to focus on, we should also recognize their strengths (i.e., their readiness, willingness, and ability to learn), so that they and we as adult educators can further reinforce them, build on them, and help learners develop additional strengths.

 Supports that AFE provides to adult learners

AFE programs typically focus on helping those individuals strengthen various "basic skills" (e.g., oral and written language, numeracy, digital skills, finding information, planning, and other foundational skills), related background knowledge and credentials, social-emotional abilities (e.g., self-efficacy belief, collaboration), and access to tools and social support systems they need to work with others to solve problems in social-technical systems (e.g., families, workplaces, labor unions, social communities) they are part of.

When well-designed and well–supported, AFE programs can help learners to manage challenges and opportunities they face. Learners can develop strategies to mitigate and

navigate around obstacles, improve the systems they are impacted by, and/or create alternatives to existing systems (Jurmo, April 2021).

By helping learners to use the above strategies, AFE programs (often in collaboration with other stakeholder groups) can better equip learners to improve their own lives and contribute to their families and other social communities they are part of.

Supports that AFE can provide to community stakeholders

In addition to providing "basic skills" related services to individuals, AFE programs also provide valuable services to diverse community stakeholders who serve and/or depend on the kinds of adult learners served by AFE providers. These other stakeholders include K-12 schools, public health service providers, employers, labor unions, economic development agencies, correctional and public safety agencies, and disabilities services. Through various kinds of collaborations with such stakeholders, AFE can help learners manage particular challenges and opportunities they face related to health; physical, neurological, and social disabilities; limited success in prior education; unsupportive family structures; criminal records; limited English proficiency and familiarity with American customs and institutions; lack of basic resources (e.g., manual tools, digital technologies, housing, transportation, food, clothing, and safe and secure living conditions); and discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, age, appearance, and other factors over which impacted individuals have limited or no control.

To illustrate what such collaborations might look like, summarized below are nine types of collaborations that AFE programs might carry out with "eco-partners" (i.e., organizations that support environmental sustainability in various ways) (Open Door Collective, September 30, 2019):

1. <u>Environmental literacy education to help learners address environmental issues and be environmental stewards in their homes, communities, and workplaces.</u>

2. <u>Green job preparation</u> that might include "intro to green careers" courses or job-specific basic skills training for green jobs like solar technician and positions in waste management, agriculture, construction and facilities management, transportation, and others.

3. <u>Environmenal services for learners</u> that help adult learners get easier access to environmental resources than they might otherwise have. (Examples include energy-savings programs and environmental hazard reduction services.)

4. <u>Building capacities of environmental partners to serve adults with basic skills challenges</u>: For example, adult educators might help environmental service

providers better understand how to communicate orally or in writing with people who are limited in their English or in math.

5. Environmentally-friendly adult education facilities: Eco-partners might help adult education programs improve how they use energy, reduce and dispose of waste, and help learners and staff access public transportation. Such educational facilities also provide learners with opportunities to learn about concepts such as recycling, energy conservation, and green jobs in areas like facilities management.

6. Environmental service learning: In this case, adult learners engage in environment-related community service projects (e.g., neighborhood clean-ups, community gardens) in which they not only provide a service but reflect on and learn from that experience. Through this kind of project-based learning, learners can build new language, science, math, leadership, and community-service-related knowledge, skills, and social networks.

7. Joint advocacy, planning, fundraising: Adult educators, eco-partners, and other community stakeholders can jointly raise public awareness, advocate for improved services, and generate financial and in-kind supports for these kinds of services that integrate AFE with environmental activities.

8. Collaborative environmental research: Adult educators and environmental partners can work with researchers based in universities or other agencies, to better understand the environmental needs of adult learners and their communities and how to respond with education and other supports.

9. Through joint professional development, adult educators, environmental partners, and social justice advocates can learn about each others' work, build working relationships, and plan joint activities.

Through such collaborations, AFE can (a) help learners better manage challenges and opportunities they face; (b) help other stakeholders better provide their intended services and products; and (c) build the capacities of AFE programs themselves to better serve adult learners and their communities.

Examples of multi-service models customized to learner and community needs and strengths

AFE for immigrants and refugees

- At Union Settlement House (USH) in East Harlem, the liberation theology of 1960s Latin America inspired a receptivity within the Latino community to the kind of

social change proposed by advocates like Paulo Freire. By the 1980s, however, the climate in East Harlem was not very promising for those who hoped for community development through collective action. Staff explained that, in "a time of very little hope for poor people," residents nonetheless participated very actively in USH because they felt it provided them with something positive. (As one participant said: "I don't have to be down because I was born down.) (Jurmo, 1987, pp. 239-240). USH emphasized mutual respect, and students selected and discussed newspaper articles related to personal concerns. A teacher introduced what he called "toxic topics" into informal discussions and "learners discovered how they, through a group, can have a voice and claim their power" (p. 242). The teacher—himself from northwest Spain where using his Galician mother tongue was forbidden when he was a child—saw this education in the way described by Freire: "[as] a means of restoring 'the voice' to the many whose voices have been denied them by oppressive society" (p. 241).

- Blue Ridge Literacy (BRL) is a community-based, non-profit organization based in Roanoke's main library building (Urban Alliance for Adult Literacy, September 2024). BRL provides AFE services to U.S.-born as well as immigrant and refugee residents of Roanoke and the surrounding Roanoke Valley. Started by two librarians in 1985 as a volunteer literacy program, BRL expanded in 1993 to include ESOL services for the growing immigrant population. In 2003 BRL became a ProLiteracy member. In 2005 it added citizenship preparation classes. Recently it has added health literacy, digital literacy, and distance learning supports.

  BRL's two-person full-time staff is supplemented by volunteers and a modest but growing number of part-time instructors (some of whom teach ESOL for employees of local businesses). The program has steadily built cross-sector partnerships with diverse stakeholders.

  Roanoke is a refugee resettlement city. Its Department of Social Services (DSS) works with Commonwealth Catholic Charities (CCC), Virginia Office of New Americans., and other agencies. BRL contracts with DSS to provide work-readiness classes to DSS-referred refugees (primarily newly-resettled). With CCC, BRL has brought a Department of Justice-accredited legal counselor into BRL's citizenship preparation classes, hosted a mental health workshop in its English & Health program, found room in its ESOL classes for CCC-referred learners, and set up a small ESOL program for eligible Afghan refugees.

  BRL representatives consistently participate in Roanoke's Virginia Community Capacity Initiative meetings of local refugee services (e.g., public schools, DSS, healthcare providers, Roanoke's Inclusion Specialist, various non-profits) to share updates, needs, and capacities. BRL also provides supports to the Roanoke Refugee Partnership (a non-profit connecting refugees with resources),

including training volunteer tutors to help learners prepare for BRL's Citizenship Prep classes and the U.S. naturalization exam. Learners receive financial aid for legal fees and travel costs related to steps (e.g., biometrics intake, naturalization test and interview, oath ceremony) in the naturalization process. BRL welcomes refugees and immigrants regardless of immigration status.   In recognition of its programs and policies for immigrant inclusion, Roanoke received Virginia's first Certified Welcoming Designation from Welcoming America.   Other BRL services include:

- o "Real-life" literacy and ESOL services to help learners navigate services and otherwise carry out meaningful roles.
- o Projects with medical and nursing schools to have their students help with ESOL classes, teach CPR and other health skills, and help learners learn about healthcare careers.
- o Showing arts and culture organizations how to work with non-native English speakers.
- o Conducting cross-organization training for staff of stakeholder partners.
- o Inviting primary school teachers to help learners support their children's learning at home, using digital tools in particular.
- o Hosting Virginia Western Community College staff to talk with BRL learners about academic and career options at VWCC.
- o Serving on a state-level immigrant and refugee integration advisory committee.

AFE for women

- Rhode Island-based WE LEARN (Women Expanding Literacy Education Action Resource Network) is . . .

    . . . a community promoting women's literacy as a tool that fosters empowerment and equity. WE LEARN seeks to build a just society and healthy communities. Therefore, we focus on education, specifically the basic literacies women need to gain access to systems of power and to achieve personal and community empowerment. Women's pursuit of multiple literacies gives visibility to our experiences as women, sustains our on-going desire to learn, encourages critical thinking, and provides the support and information necessary for reflection, understanding, and action to change our current situations. WE LEARN engages a diverse community of adult basic education and literacy learners and alumni, educators, researchers and professional women, community activists and anyone dedicated to moving our mission forward.

WE LEARN'S *Women's Perspectives: A Journal of Writing and Art by Adult Learners* has been published annually since 2006. Each theme-based issue showcases original writings and artwork by adult literacy/basic education students across all levels. The WP Committee prepares pre-writing activities and lesson plans to guide student writers and their teachers to develop and submit quality writing. . . Student writers have also become teachers and inspiration to other students." Learners serve on the WE LEARN board and make presentations at conferences (e.g., sharing "how to use writing props and editing tools to perfect their writing.") Visit the WE LEARN website at https://www.welearnwomen.org and a "WE LEARN History and Future" podcast at https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/ctlfpodcast/episodes/WE-LEARN---History-and-Future-e1vk8k2

AFE for workers in particular occupations

 In the later 1990s through the first decade of the 2000s, advocates for a "worker-centered" approach to basic education for incumbent workers and job-seekers emphasized helping learners to both (a) contribute to building productive, safe, and healthy workplaces and (b) secure family-sustaining wages and benefits while protecting their rights as workers. Worker-centered programs incorporated those themes into participatory instructional activities and also provided advocacy, legal protections, job placement, and other supports for participating workers (Sarmiento & Kay, 1990). Three examples are presented below:

- A test-prep program for public transportation workers

In the first decade of the 2000s, to help New York City public transit (subway and bus) workers prepare for civil service promotional exams, the Transport Workers Union Local 100 and Metropolitan Transit Authority created a Training and Upgrading Fund (TUF) worker education program. TUF's first set of activities was a test-prep program customized to the particular demands of various kinds of civil service exams. (Both union members and other members of the public had to do well on those exams to be considered for emerging jobs in the city's huge public transit system.)

Some of the exams focused on the technical reading and test-taking skills of test-takers. TUF hired adult educators who had expertise in the design and implementation of participatory education geared to workplace uses of basic skills. The educators first adapted literacy task analysis strategies to review similar exams and clarify the particular skills such exams required. The educators found that the exams required test-takers to quickly determine what information the questions were asking for and then locate that information in sample passages taken from relevant technical manuals. Test-takers also had to quickly respond

accurately to as many questions as possible in a specified time. The educators then created a participatory curriculum in which test-takers were exposed to sample test questions; learned strategies for scanning to find relevant information, manage their time, make reasonable guesses if necessary, and otherwise answer test questions without unnecessary delay.

The program offered about four two-hour classes in which facilitators helped learners understand the content and requirements of the exam and then develop relevant test-taking skills, self-confidence, and positive motivation to succeed in the exam. In the classes, participants engaged in active, collaborative learning (e.g., sharing of strategies, asking questions, giving feedback) and provided positive encouragement to fellow learners. Feedback from participants was positive, and TUF used the experience in the first few test-prep courses to inform other educational activities (e.g., technical English and math required for admission to college-level electronics courses) it provided to workers in subsequent years (Jurmo, March 2021).

- ESOL for Eldercare Workers**.**

In 2008-2009, Union County (NJ) College set up an "ESOL for Healthcare" program for English-language learners interested in jobs in the growing eldercare industry. The program was a partnership of UCC's non-credit division, several local eldercare agencies, a non-profit Haitian community agency, the International Longevity Center (a national eldercare organization), and the MetLife Foundation (which provided seed funding). UCC staff identified the English skills needed by home healthcare workers by interviewing staff at a local nursing home and a UCC eldercare expert and reviewing related articles. The team then created an eldercare-related ESOL curriculum incorporating elements of the National Retail Federation Foundation's customer service curriculum; recruited instructors with backgrounds in ESOL, eldercare, and local immigrant communities; recruited students (most of whom were Spanish-speaking women from the area's large Latino population); conducted three pilot classes (one for clients of a Haitian community organization and two for primarily Spanish-speaking women); and established working relationships with local nursing industry employers (to inform the program and help graduates connect to jobs).

Through role-plays and problem-solving activities, participants developed their abilities to communicate with patients, patients' families, and potential employers. They also learned about available jobs in eldercare and how to pursue them. They practiced how to present themselves professionally (e.g., each purchased or made a conservative black pantsuit to wear to job interviews and prepared a well-organized resume describing their qualifications). And they organized an inspiring graduation ceremony (attended by family members, college

staff, and others) where more-confident students made speeches of thanks and encouragement in English. (Student-made refreshments followed.)

This carefully-crafted program produced real results for graduates (e.g., relevant language skills and technical knowledge, self-confidence, networks, a credential, a resume, a reference, a job-interview wardrobe, jobs) and for the project partners (e.g., curricula, expertise, and a career pathway model adaptable for multiple industries; qualified workers for local employers) (Jurmo, December 6, 2009).

- Paperwork for textile workers

In 1994-1997, at the Albany International textile plant in Homer, New York, an outside adult educator (from the local community college) was brought in to plan and implement a project to help workers develop the "paperwork" skills they needed. Key elements included:

  - o The educator worked with a company representative to create a "model portfolio" of samples of correctly-completed paperwork.
  - o Workers reviewed that portfolio to familiarize themselves with what the company wanted in terms of paperwork. Thirty workers then brought in fourteen samples of their own paperwork and, over several weeks, met with the educator to go through their samples to clarify what they were doing right and what they needed to improve. (In a way that ensured the confidentiality of the workers, the company representative also gave feedback to the educator about the learners' work, to ensure that the learners were getting correct information about what the company needed.)
  - o Workers stored their work in "working portfolios." The educator met with each worker individually to review the portfolio, both to ensure confidentiality and to accommodate their varied schedules. Sometimes the educator also met with groups of learners to discuss commonly-performed forms of paperwork (e.g., filling out accident reports).
  - o The working portfolio was thus seen as a focal point for learning activities, rather than merely as an "assessment" tool tacked onto instruction. Learners stored their best work in a "mastery" portfolio. Those with special expertise in particular forms of paperwork were invited to serve as "experts" who helped in the instructional process or as mentors.
  - o This mix of one-to-one instruction with short, focused workshops was seen as a departure from more-common workplace education approaches which try to "fit" busy companies and workers to traditional classroom formats and schedules. This process also created an atmosphere for ongoing career

development and learning within the company culture. See the Albany International (Homer) sections of Jurmo (1994g and August 1998).

AFE for adults impacted by terrorism

On the day after the September 11th attacks in New York City in 2001, the Consortium for Worker Education (CWE, a citywide coalition of over 30 labor unions) began pulling together a worker education and job placement program for thousands of workers whose jobs disappeared after the destruction and closing down of Lower Manhattan. (Support came from the September 11th Fund, a special United Way initiative created with donations from individuals and organizations from all over the U.S. and the world.) In subsequent months, former workers in hospitality, garment, and other industries came to the CWE's mid-town Manhattan office to get job search assistance and training in job-interviewing, resume-writing, and computer skills and in English as a Second Language. (Because of the closing of so many garment factories in Lower Manhattan, many immigrant garment workers were confronting the need to find jobs in other industries like healthcare) (Jurmo, Fall 2002).

CWE staff adapted the Equipped for the Future model to create participatory ESOL activities (e.g., role plays, games, stories written by learners around student-made photos of events and people) that helped participants develop strategies and related oral English skills that they could adapt to many types of work situations and other social contexts (e.g., personal introductions, dealing with health and safety issues, identifying and locating objects, giving and getting directions to and from locations, responding to emergencies) (Jurmo, November 2002; Jurmo & Love, March 2003).

In one class, learners made a site visit to a Whole Foods Market across the street from the union education center, working in teams to interview store employees about their jobs and then return to class to report their findings. In another activity, learners used disposable cameras to make photo stories about their neighborhoods, families, festivals, and other personally-relevant themes. They printed the photos, mounted them on paper, wrote brief descriptions of the photos, and then made presentations of their finished products to fellow class members and teachers.

AFE to counter racial and class bias

- Anti-racism education: Judy Hofer (February 1998) described why and how she addressed issues of racism in her ABE/GED program in western Massachusetts, where most students were white. She wanted a classroom environment where all could feel welcomed and take ownership. Rather than just react to racist comments that arose, she wanted to proactively create an anti-racist environment.

She also wanted to help students deal with "race" outside the classroom. "I don't feel that any of us can truly be effective workers, family and community members without addressing issues of racism and other 'isms.' Learning to work together across our differences is basic to our survival." (p. 16).

Hofer listed "classroom ideas" for addressing racism: acknowledging "race" isn't just a white- black issue; using racist comments as teachable moments; incorporating multicultural issues into the curriculum; affirming students'—including low-income whites'—histories and experiences; acknowledging the many forms of privilege; and drawing a community map showing higher- and lower-income neighborhoods. She proposed "program ideas" to create an anti-racist program (e.g., training staff on oppression and how to better serve minorities; including commitment to diversity as a criterion on performance reviews; hiring staff who represent the community's diversity; and asking students to state their race during intake, to introduce the issue early on.)

- <u>Helping AFE teachers to understand class bias</u>

Jereann King (February, 2003) described how class discrimination manifested itself in a literacy program in North Carolina's mountains where all the volunteer teachers and most students were white. Though the teachers were "very benevolent and wanted to help," they were from a different class and "were not people who had experienced education as a barrier: a good education was part of their privilege." They had no personal experience of lacking education and could not understand how their learners had made it to adulthood without being able to read. These values were seen in how the teachers interacted with students around language use. "Often teachers would say the students 'talked country.' Instead of using the richness of the mountain language, the volunteers saw it as nonstandard and a deficit." To address this problem,   King introduced a learner-centered curriculum that focused on social and economic issues. "The teachers had to put the lives, . . . experiences, . . . culture, . . . histories, and goals of the students in the center of the teaching and learning" (pp. 16-17).

Common strengths of these collaborations

The above kinds of collaborative, customized AFE partnerships have the following strengths:

- Creative use of limited resources;
- Collaboration among AFE providers and between AFE and other stakeholders;
- Willingness to see learners as more than "disadvantaged," "hard to serve," "poor," "marginalized," "damaged," "oppressed," "vulnerable," but as problem-

solvers, leaders, and active and empowered participants in their work, family, and civic roles;

- Willingness to see AFE work as more than helping learners "pass the GED exam" or "improve their scores on a standardized test" (as important as those goals might be);
- Respect and love for learners and their communities;
- Educators' personal experience with and sensitivity to life's challenges (human problems) that can inform their work with learners.

Learners can bring these strengths to well-designed, -implemented, and –equipped AFE programs:

- Willingness to learn;
- Desire to succeed for themselves and their families and communities;
- Significant life experiences and skills to learn from, build on, and contribute to the AFE program and fellow learners;
- Successful life experience working in collaborative groups and adapting that to collaborative learning activities.

In sum . . .

These diverse, creative AFE programs demonstrate the why's and how's of AFE partnerships customized to both the limitations (challenges) and strengths of adult learners. Such programs can help learners and their communities manage opportunities and challenges they face. This form of education should be a key component of high-quality U.S. adult foundational education systems that better serve more learners and communities. Creating such programs require both learners, educators, and other partners who are "ready, willing, and able to learn."

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Message #10

Voices for Environmental Sustainability

October 29, 2024

This summary draws heavily on a guidebook I wrote with the help of other AFE and environmental colleagues in 2019. Titled "Greening U.S. Adult Basic Skills: What Eco-Partners and Adult Educators Can Do Together," it was published by the Open Door Collective. To access this document, see "For Further Information" at the end.

Environmental challenges and opportunities

Environmental challenges disproportionately impact people with low basic skills. Impacts can include reduced health, employment options, and ability to make informed decisions as consumers and citizens – for those individuals and their families.

Adults with limited basic skills often have limited economic opportunities and resources. The communities in which lower-income people reside are more often the sites of polluting industries: power plants, trucking and distribution hubs, energy extraction businesses, hazardous waste sites, etc. This group is thus often more severely impacted by contamination of air, soil, water, and food sources. They are more likely to feel the effects of rising costs of energy, food, and other resources that result from drought, floods, and other weather conditions. Lower-income families typically have fewer connections to the networks of influence that could alleviate pollution and fewer resources to change their circumstances (by moving, for example) or to afford technologies or training that could help them deal with those hazards.

A recent growth in new kinds of technologies, energy sources, jobs, and work and consumer strategies can counter the above negative environmental trends, and people in the U.S. now have the opportunity to adopt environmentally-sustainable ways of living, working, and interacting with the environment. However, doing so can be more difficult for those with limited basic skills and economic resources.

Though these adults often possess significant strengths – practical skills, family and community support networks, collaboration skills, and positive motivation -- basic skills limitations can make it difficult to access and use environmentally-sustaining practices and resources in their workplaces, homes, and communities.

For example, people who live in areas with high levels of truck traffic know that their children are affected with asthma and other respiratory ailments. Similarly, residents in areas with soil pollution know that they cannot grow food without decontaminating that soil. Obtaining understandable information on what to do in these cases (and in the other pressing environmental circumstances low-income individuals and families find themselves in) can be more difficult for those with lower levels of basic skills. Not only might their lack of basic skills make it difficult to understand environmental information in written or oral forms, their basic skills limitations might have blocked their ability to develop environmental knowledge in secondary school and post- secondary education or via newspapers, television, or the Internet.

It can also be difficult for them to take advantage of new "green" education, job training, and work opportunities because occupational training programs do not always adequately accommodate learners who have lower levels of basic skills. They are thus blocked from learning how to use more environment-sustaining practices in their current jobs and/or to move into new jobs that are supportive of environmental sustainability.

To reduce and possibly eliminate these negative impacts, we propose new partnerships between "eco-partners" (i.e., eco-friendly stakeholders who have expertise, resources, networks, and other environmental sustainability assets), adult basic skills programs, and the adults and communities those education programs serve.

Who are the "eco-partners" that AFE programs might work with?

We define "eco-partners" broadly as organizations and individuals that have as a primary or secondary goal the protection and improvement of our natural environment. These could include public- or private- sector organizations that:

- set, support, monitor, and implement environmental- protection policies and regulations;
- create and distribute environmentally-friendly products;
- provide environmental education, employment, and improvement services;
- in other ways serve to protect and improve our natural environment (e.g., by reducing carbon emissions and greenhouse gases; promoting renewable energy resources; cleaning air, water, and soil; reducing waste of resources; using eco-friendly food- production practices; and increasing community access to the natural environment).

Eco-partners could include environmental advocacy groups, community cleanup efforts, green- job training programs (e.g., solar installation, weatherization, uses of energy-saving technologies) and employers seeking environmentally-trained employees, companies that produce and sell green products (e.g., organic foods, cleaning products,

solar equipment), environmental education centers, labor unions promoting environmentally-sustainable workplaces, community recycling centers, funders of environmental- sustainability initiatives, etc.

The term "eco-partners" should be viewed in a flexible way. They might be organizations that include environmental sustainability as part of a larger mission. For example, a primary school might include environmental education in its curriculum or a youth group might volunteer to do environmental cleanup activities as part of its community service program.

Potential benefits of collaborations between AFE programs and eco-partners

Reduce poverty and income inequality for adults with limited basic skills by helping them to:

- become better-informed consumers so they can use natural resources in environmentally- sustainable ways in their homes, at work, and in their use of transportation.
- ·manage their personal financial and in-kind resources more efficiently.
- develop expertise and connections that they can use to succeed in family-sustaining green jobs (e.g., energy conservation and production, environmental cleanup, waste reduction, production of environmentally-sustainable food sources).

Benefit other stakeholders by:

- improving communities (e.g., environmental sustainability, public health, economic development climate, community cohesion) where adult learners live and work and where education programs operate;
- strengthening adult basic education programs by improving their use of natural resources, making program services more relevant and attractive to students, increasing program access to a wider range of resources and partnerships; and improving the public image of adult basic skills programs as supporters of environmental sustainability;
- strengthening environmental improvement efforts by improving their access to adult learners, their communities, and education and other programs that serve them.

How might AFE programs and eco-partners collaborate?

1. Environmental literacy education to help learners address environmental issues and be environmental stewards in their homes, communities, and workplaces.

2. Green job preparation might include "intro to green careers" courses or job-specific basic skills training for green jobs like solar technician and positions in waste management, agriculture, construction and facilities management, transportation, and others.

3. Environmental services for adult learners to help them get easier access to environmental services than they might otherwise have. (Examples include energy-savings programs and environmental hazard reduction services.)

4. Building capacities of environmental partners to serve adults with basic skills challenges: For example, adult educators might help environmental service providers better understand how to communicate orally or in writing with people who are limited in their English or in math.

5. Environmentally-friendly adult education facilities: Eco-partners might help adult education programs improve how they use energy, reduce and dispose of waste, and help learners and staff access public transportation.

6. Environmental service learning: Adult learners engage in environment-related community service projects in which they not only provide a service but reflect on and learn from that experience. Through this kind of project-based learning, learners can build new language, science, math, leadership, and community-service-related knowledge and skills.

7. Joint advocacy, planning, fundraising: Adult educators, eco-partners, and other community stakeholders can jointly raise public awareness, advocate for improved services, and generate financial and in-kind supports for these kinds of services.

8. Collaborative environmental research: Adult educators and environmental partners can work with researchers based in universities or other agencies, to better understand the environmental needs of adult learners and their communities and how to respond with education and other supports.

9. Through joint professional development, adult educators, environmental partners, and social justice advocates can learn about each others' work, build working relationships, and plan joint activities.

In sum . . .

Through such collaborations, AFE can (a) help learners (and the families and communities they are part of) better manage environmental challenges and opportunities they face; (b) help eco-partners better provide their intended services and products to

support environmental sustainability; and (c) build the capacities of AFE programs themselves to better serve adult learners and their communities.

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Migration Policy Institute: Visit the MPI website to see recent documents related to the impact of climate change on immigrants and their potential roles in helping the U.S. respond to climate change: https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research .

Visit the "Adult Education Sustainability" website: https://www.adultedsustainability.com .

Visit the "Roots of Success" website: https://rootsofsuccess.org/ .

Visit the "Science" section of the LINCS "Adult Education & Literacy Resource Collection": https://lincs.ed.gov/resource-collection .

Message #11

Voices for Multi-Purpose Adult Foundational Education

November 2, 2024

The previous ten messages in this series presented arguments for and examples of how AFE can serve multiple purposes, for a wide range of learners and communities, using effective instructional and administrative practices, and drawing on supports from diverse governmental and non-governmental sources.

This eleventh message presents arguments from the past five decades for such multi-purpose AFE systems. well-designed and well-supported AFE systems. Subsequent messages will focus on what AFE supporters can do to transition our field to such a model. (See the "References" section at the end for links to documents cited here.)

- **The Adult Performance Level Study** (**University of Texas at Austin, 1977**) said that AFE should focus on teaching contextualized basic skills relevant to real-world uses of literacy rather than "skills out of context." Such uses included literacy tasks related to work, health, financial, and consumer roles.

- **David Harman (May 1985,** p.9) stated:

  If literacy programs are to take root among those most in need of assistance, attention will have to be paid first to their overall environments and conditions of life. Social policy cannot be segmented; most people do not believe that increasing their reading abilities will help solve other issues as an independent variable. Literacy, then, can be introduced effectively as one component in a broader, more encompassing social action program that succeeds, among its other tasks, in inculcating a literacy consciousness into environments where it is currently lacking. If literacy requirements do not become embedded in contexts and environments as though they are expected, desired, and rewarded competencies, it is unlikely that future attempts to teach reading and writing will fare any better than they have in the past.

- **SCANS (Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, 1991,** p. vi) identified the "foundation" skills that U.S. workers need for emerging workplaces. These skills included basic language and math skills, thinking skills (e.g., thinking creatively, making decisions, solving problems, knowing how to learn), and several personal qualities (e.g., responsibility, self-esteem, sociability, self-management, integrity/honesty). SCANS, along with the above Adult Performance Level Study, the National Institute for Literacy's Equipped for the

Future skill standards (Stein, 2000), and other research and development initiatives pushed the AFE field to go beyond defining "literacy" as only a few traditional, and often decontextualized, "basic skills" like reading, writing, and/or math and toward a more comprehensive view of what adults need to succeed in the economy and larger society.

- **From 1994 to 2006, <u>the National Institute for Literacy, in its Equipped for the Future (EFF) adult basic education system reform initiative</u>,** laid the groundwork for a new national AFE system that used research-informed practices to help learners participate effectively in personally-relevant work, family, and civic roles. EFF identified relevant research that supported this perspective; identified 16 basic skills adults need; created guidelines for and models of curricula and assessments; trained a cadre of resource persons; and showed how policy makers and funders could support using EFF at national, state, and local levels (Chisman & Spangenberg, October 8, 2009; Stein, 2000).

- **The National Commission on Adult Literacy (NCAL) (June 2008)** advocated for a major re-working of U.S. adult basic skills education**.** Though particularly concerned about the work-readiness of U.S. workers, NCAL also argued that AFE should serve parents of young children, the burgeoning U.S. prison population, and the growing population of immigrants.

- **Alisa Belzer and Jeounghee Kim (May/June 2018)** traced the evolution of federal AFE policy from to 1960s to the present. Until the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998, AFE generally was seen as a tool for helping individuals to "function on the job and in society, to achieve one's goals and develop one's knowledge and potential." WIA, however, was interpreted as shifting emphasis to "job search, retention, and career advancement, sometimes to the detriment of working toward meeting other learner goals" (p. 604). The authors argued that (a) job advancement typically requires more intense and sustained instruction than most adult education programs can deliver with the resources provided to them; (b) job advancement and increasing income are often not feasible or desired goals for some learners given the complexities involved in attaining and retaining family-sustaining employment; and (c) focusing primarily on employment can mean that other important goals of learners are overlooked or not given adequate attention.

- **For the Migration Policy Institute, Margie McHugh and Catrina Doxsee (October 2018,** pp. 1-2) wrote:

    While federal adult education provisions formerly allowed a more balanced approach to teaching English and meeting learners' needs in their roles as parents, workers, and citizens, WIOA (the Workforce Innovation and

Opportunity Act passed in 2014) instituted mandatory performance measures that focus mainly on employment outcomes and the attainment of postsecondary credentials, placing no value on other essential integration skills or topics . . .

Without adult education programing that is not bound to employment-focused outcome measures, it is extremely difficult to meet the needs of immigrants and refugees seeking to integrate into the social fabric of their communities, support their children's educational success, and ultimately become naturalized citizens.

- **Stephen Reder (Spring 2020)** argued for "A Lifelong and Life-Wide Framework for Adult Literacy Education":

    It would move AFE away from primarily (a) helping "adult students increase their standardized test scores, obtain high school equivalency, find training or postsecondary education" and (b) focusing on "the needs of employers and workforce development stakeholders rather than the needs of the adult students" (pp. 48-49).

    While recognizing that work-related outcomes are important for many adult learners, a more comprehensive AFE approach would also serve the "many other adults needing stronger basic skills (who) have other learning goals and motivations" (p. 49). These include the "millions of adults (who) are not in the workforce due to age, disabilities, poor health, family care responsibilities, etc." as well as others who "wish to improve their basic skills for other reasons entirely such as assisting their children with schoolwork, understanding and addressing their own health issues or those of family members, or participating in civic affairs such as voting or understanding political issues." (p. 51).

    "Authentic literacy instruction, structured around the literacy activities and purposes in individual adults' lives, is associated with increased engagement in literacy practices after students leave the program (Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobson, & Soler, 2002). Besides helping adults to apply their basic skills in activities to meet their personal goals, there may be important side effects of their increased literacy engagement. Recent research indicates that broad social outcomes such as social trust, general health, political efficacy and volunteerism – to name but a few – are positively associated with basic skills including literacy and numeracy (OECD, 2013)" (p.51).

    "By designing and evaluating programs in terms of the longer- term outcomes they produce, it becomes easier to assess the actual impact that

programs have, which in turn could make a more compelling case for funding. By using longer-term outcomes as criterion measures in program improvement processes, it should become easier to identify more promising program designs and implementations, thereby strengthening programs over time" (p.51).

"We should position this reform as adding to rather than replacing existing WIOA programs. With their narrow and short-term focus on employment, WIOA programs are part of a workforce development system that helps meet the needs of many adults in the workforce and their employers. This serves an important function in our economy and society. We nevertheless need public funding for other kinds of adult basic skills programs organized in a lifelong and life-wide framework" (p.52).

- **Judy Mortrude (Spring 2020)** agreed with Stephen Reder's arguments above. She then added:

  "It is time for our field to seriously revisit how we demonstrate skill gain" (p. 55).

  "It isn't healthy to have all your performance measures dictated by one fund. We need other measurements supported by other funds" (p. 56)

  Programs might, for example, be funded to help learners work in teams to solve "tangible community problems" such as "Latinx injuries and deaths on construction sites; aging community members in need of home care; historic, systemic trauma impacting individuals and community systems" (p. 57).

  Such a "reframing of adult education's impact" could be woven into emerging federal funding (e.g., Digital Equity Act, SKILLS Act for working learners, and the New Deal for New Americans bill to support positive immigrant integration) (p. 57).

  "Finally, our solutions need to be driven by our community needs . . . Working with the people in our classrooms and communities, we can and must develop new practices, measures, partners, and funding opportunities to broaden our work and lengthen our impact" (p. 57).

- **A Working Group of national AFE advocates** developed a vision for a "Re-imagined Adult Education System" for the Open Door Collective in 2021 (Rosen, 2021). Such a system would help learners deal with a wide range of life issues and involve other stakeholder groups in partnerships that focus on those learner life issues.

- **The Adult Literacy and Learning Impact Network (ALL IN)** (Cacicio, Cote, & Bigger, June 2023) proposed an AFE system that (a) better equips learners to use the "many literacies" they need to manage health, financial, and other opportunities and challenges they face in life and (b) is supported by partnerships with stakeholders who share an interest in corresponding social functions such as public health, poverty reduction, criminal justice reform, immigrant integration, and economic development.

- **The Migration Policy Institute (Hofstetter & McHugh, October 2023)** emphasized that immigrant adults have different types of learning and other needs that need to be responded to by AFE services. These needs include (a) lower levels of education in their home countries, (b) low-wage jobs (which tend not to offer training opportunities), (c) lack of legal status, and (d) unfamiliarity with U.S. society, culture, and institutions. These challenges can make participation and success in AFE programs difficult. Inappropriate performance measures and use of curricula and other support services not customized to immigrant needs can also make it difficult for AFE programs to serve immigrant learners. AFE should also recognize that, because immigrant families have disproportionately larger numbers of children, two-generation (family) education services are particularly important for immigrants.

- **In November 2023, Paul Jurmo (**October, 2023) wrote a five-volume series titled *"In Community, Strength: Changing Our Minds about U.S. Adult Foundational Education."* It summarized the above kinds of arguments for and examples of multi-purpose AFE systems designed and supported to better serve more learners and more communities.

In sum . . .

In the past five decades, significant good work has been done to develop AFE systems that use effective instructional and administrative practices to respond to diverse interests and strengths of adult learners and the communities they are part of.   We should learn from and build on that work, to transition our current version of AFE to a more effective one.

Drawing on previous models of AFE systems reform, subsequent messages in this series will suggest strategies that AFE advocates might now take to support a serious AFE reform effort in the United States.

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