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Building Better ABE

Alisa Belzer (Ed.) (2007)

Toward Defining and Improving Quality in Adult Basic Education.

Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum. 327 pages. \$89.95

Toward Defining and Improving Quality in Adult Basic Education is a collection of 16 research papers presented at a 2003 conference at Rutgers University. As editor Alisa Belzer states in the introduction, the conference focused on the questions of “what we do know, what we can do, and what we should try” vis-à-vis building high-quality adult basic education (ABE) systems. Five years later, these remain central questions for our field, which is still challenged by “a context of scarcity; the field is under funded, it is staffed by an inconsistently-trained workforce, and policy, administration, and instruction [are] implemented with little empirical knowledge to inform them.”

The researchers challenge many of the assumptions about the purposes, participants, and practices of adult education. Here is a sampling of the 16 articles:

- ✦ **“Equipped for the Future and Standards-Based Educational Improvement: Achieving Results that Matter for Adult Learners”** Sondra Stein makes the case for building a national ABE system that focuses on helping adults develop the skills and knowledge they need for the real-world tasks they face as workers, family members, and community members and citizens. Such a system needs to clearly define the content of programs and guide staff to use assessment, instructional, and administrative practices that help learners develop those skills. Policy makers and funders in turn need to know how to support programs with professional development, appropriate assessment and reporting procedures, and adequate, targeted funding. This logic underlies the Equipped for the Future systems reform initiative, which the National Institute for Literacy launched a decade ago and which many adult educators continue to look to as a guide for good practice in our field.
- ✦ **“Beyond the Life Boat: Improving Language, Citizenship, and Training Services for Immigrants and Refugees”** Heide Spruck Wrigley describes a very large and growing population of adult education customers: immigrants. In a few short pages, she clearly summarizes the various immigrant subpopulations and their particular linguistic, educational, occupational, family, and civic needs. She argues for a “differentiated” system of contextualized services that responds to these multiple needs and enables learners to move from

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survival English to higher levels of language fluency, technical knowledge, credentials, and integration into the workforce and society. Though focusing on immigrants, Spruck Wrigley's framework for analyzing and serving a particular learner population could be adapted to planning services for other adult education customers, including out-of-school youth, ex-offenders, and various populations of low-income, undereducated U.S.-born people.

Elisabeth Hayes urges adult educators to see the mastery of digital technologies as a key purpose for adult education.

- ✦ **“The EMPower Project: Connecting Curriculum Development and Research”** Mary Jane Schmitt and Martha Merson describe why adult numeracy needs to be given more emphasis in the nation's ABE system. Not only do adults need strong math skills to deal with financial needs, move to higher levels of education, and participate as informed citizens, but their employment prospects improve significantly if they have particular math skills required for better-paying jobs. Schmitt and Merson argue that applied math (numeracy) is largely undervalued within the ABE field and that the math instruction that is provided tends to rely on underprepared instructors who teach the wrong forms of math in the wrong ways (i.e., drilling in abstract skills). The authors present an alternative, “transformative” model of numeracy instruction in which students “work in small groups, interacting, puzzling over problems, strategizing about solutions, sharing these solutions with other groups in the class, and listening to others' solutions and strategies” (p. 182).
- ✦ **“Giving Literacy Away, Again: New Concepts of Promising Practice”** Stephen Reder invites us to expand our thinking about how adult learners develop basic skills. “Self-study” is a strategy engaged in by many adult learners and should be encouraged and supported by adult education programs, which have historically tended to take the “school-based” view that the classroom is the place where learning happens. Programs should help learners develop self-study plans; select materials to use on their own; provide tutors, mentors, computers, homework hotlines, and Web sites to learners who want to engage in self-study; and encourage learners to stay in touch with programs and see them as a resource even if the learners cannot attend classroom-based instruction.
- ✦ **“Reconceptualizing Adult Basic Education and the Digital Divide”** Elisabeth Hayes urges adult educators to see the mastery of digital technologies as a key purpose for adult education. “Ultimately, digital literacy education must be integrated with broader community development projects in which technology is used to attain broader social, political, and economic aims. . . . Do we contribute, albeit unintentionally, to a widening of the digital divide? Or can adult educators, together with learners, find creative ways to use digital

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technologies as tools in an effort to promote greater social inclusion of all people in our society?" (p. 218).

- ✦ **“Professional Development and Evidence-Based Practice in Adult Education”** Mary Beth Bingman and Cristine Smith argue that adult educators need good information if they are to make good decisions. Teachers need to learn how to get access to reliable evidence-based information and decide how to adapt it to their particular teaching situations. This can be done through professional development (PD) opportunities for adult educators, but the availability and quality of PD are irregular. They cite guidelines for effective PD, stating that PD needs to (a) be longer than an occasional brief workshop, (b) be connected to teachers’ work, (c) emphasize analysis and reflection, (d) help teachers make explicit what they know and assume and test their thinking against new knowledge, (e) help teachers study their students’ thinking, (f) use a variety of instructional activities (e.g., presentations, classroom applications, etc.), and (g) encourage collaboration among teachers from the same program.
- ✦ **“Learning to Read as a Cultural Process”** James Paul Gee succinctly summarizes various perspectives on how to teach reading skills and how people learn various vernaculars and strategies to respond to the particular purposes and contexts of the reading tasks they face. As an example, he describes the special language and literacy skills required to succeed in interactive computer games. He suggests that some adults who have low literacy skills never successfully developed the specialized academic skills they needed to succeed in elementary school reading classes. To help those adults learn to read, “the learning process must be connected to some literate culture of which they want or need to become a member.” But adult education programs often “try to teach adults to read in isolation from the discourses in which they wish to join. . . . Learning to read cannot be a generic process. . . . It must be a cultural process. . . . ‘Learning to use literacy to become and be a certain type of person with other people.’ . . . In the end, this is what Paulo Freire’s work was all about. Learning to read the word is integrally linked not just to learning to read the world, as Freire argued, but it is also integrally linked, as Freire knew so well, to becoming a new type of person. When we teach reading in ways that sever the link to identities and cultures, we cut off the engine that drives learning” (p. 154).
- ✦ **“Supporting Persistence of Adult Basic Education Students”** John Comings and Sondra Cuban present four strategies for helping adults persist and succeed in their learning: (a) Continuously help learners establish meaningful

learning goals; (b) Increase learners' sense of self-efficacy related to specific learning tasks; (c) Help learners to manage factors that can support or block persistence; and (d) Support learner progress by providing quality instruction and other services and using assessment to demonstrate and guide progress. The authors also encourage programs to recognize that not all learners are equally ready to participate fully in a program and to provide various ways for learners to engage in learning (including self study arrangements in which students check in periodically for help).

- ✦ **“Accountability and Program Quality: The Third Wave”** Larry Condelli explains what for some is the arcane thinking that has gone into the creation of the National Reporting System (NRS) to which most of our publicly funded programs are required to funnel data. In the introduction, Alisa Belzer points out that the NRS was “a pragmatic response to a federal mandate that the ABE system show a return on investment” but “there is no substantive interconnection” between the NRS and the Equipped for the Future model of adult learning (p. 5).

Potential audiences for this book include policy makers, funders, program administrators, instructors, assessment specialists, curriculum developers, professional development specialists, and other stakeholders at national, state, community, and program levels.

The book is a valuable resource for those who want to build adult education systems that (a) recognize that there are many different types of learner populations to be served; (b) customize services to the interests and realities of those populations; (c) help learners learn in both classroom and non-classroom environments; (d) expand the focus of instruction beyond the 3 Rs to include teamwork, research, basic computers, and other basic skills; (e) integrate the development of basic skills with the development of other types of knowledge needed for work, family, and civic roles so that learners can effectively apply skills to improve their lives; and (f) provide appropriate supports to adult educators so they can work as well-equipped professionals.

This is a time when busy adult educators need to think carefully about where to invest our time and limited resources. If we want to build a system that effectively helps adults and out-of-school youth be self-reliant, effective workers, family members, and citizens, we need to learn from the kinds of thinkers whose work is so clearly presented in this volume.

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