In Community, Strength
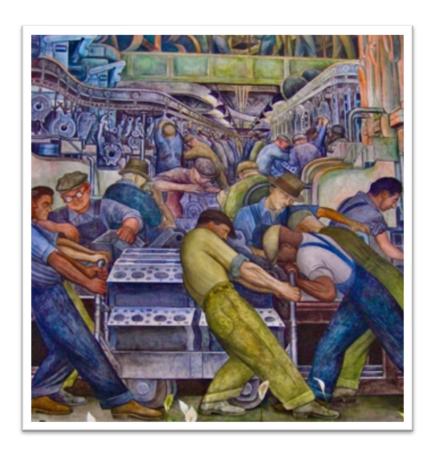
Changing Our Minds
about U.S. Adult Foundational Education

Book 1
Series Summary and Introduction

A Resource Book Series
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Illustration from *Detroit Industry Murals,* Diego Rivera, Detroit Institute of Arts, 1932-33

Contents

Series Summary

This resource book series is written for adult foundational education (AFE) practitioners, adult learners, policy makers and funders, researchers, and other stakeholders who want to strengthen and expand AFE efforts in the United States.   It was written in response to concerns that the current mix of AFE services in the U.S. (a) serves only small percentages of the estimated millions of adults who are challenged by basic skills limitations; (b) responds to only a limited range of learner interests and needs; (c) doesn't adequately involve or tap into the supports of important stakeholders in learners' communities; and (d) doesn't adequately use effective instructional and administrative practices already developed by AFE and other fields.

The series proposes that advocates, policy makers, funders, and other potential partners for AFE and adult learners re-organize themselves in ways to transition this important work to a more comprehensive and effective "community-oriented" model.

The five books are organized as follows:

Book 1: Series Summary and Introduction

Book 2: Our Adult Foundational Education Report Card

Book 3: Vision & Voices for Multi-Purpose, Collaborative, Empowerment-Focused AFE

Book 4: Community-Oriented AFE at the Local Level

Book 5: What We Can Do to Generate Supports & Supporters for Community-Oriented AFE

As author, I drew on an extensive literature review of years of AFE reports and articles, responses to a survey sent to AFE practitioners, interviews and meetings with AFE practitioners and researchers, written feedback from reviewers, and my own four decades of work in the AFE field. In particular, I am taking information and ideas from a series of documents I wrote with the

help of colleagues in the last five years, which can be seen at
www.pauljurmo.info.

Summarized below are key points raised in Books 2 through 5:

Book 2: Our Adult Foundational Education Report Card

Since the mid-1980s, U.S. adult foundational education (AFE) has had the following strengths and limitations:

<u>Strengths</u>

- Learners have developed diverse strengths (e.g., foundational/basic skills, content knowledge, credentials, social-emotional strengths, life and career plans, digital and other tools/equipment, and support systems) needed for work, family, civic, and lifelong learning roles.
- Other stakeholder partners have been helped to fulfill their respective goals/missions.
- Infrastructures of human resources, resource materials, facilities have been developed that can be adapted to support future AFE efforts.

<u>Limitations</u>

- <u>Insufficient Reach</u>
  - Small numbers of potential learners participating, persisting, and succeeding in AFE programs.
  - Limited involvement in AFE services by other stakeholders beyond traditional/expected funders and policy makers.

- <u>Inadequate Relevance and Requirements</u>
  - Insufficient understanding of the populations of potential adult learners, the communities learners operate in, and potentially valuable service models and resources.
  - Limited relevance of existing services and funding requirements to the multiple needs and interests of the diverse populations of potential and actual AFE participants and their communities.

- <u>Underdeveloped Resources</u>
  - Insufficient professional staffing.

- o Inadequate sustained financial and in-kind support from diverse sources.
- o Limited acknowledgment of and support for AFE as a profession.

If we are to better serve more adult learners and strengthen the quality and reach of AFE services, we need to plan and advocate for a new AFE systems reform effort that builds on previous and recent experience – both positive and less-positive -- and research in our field.

Book 3: Vision & Voices for Multi-Purpose, Collaborative, Empowerment-Focused AFE

Part 3.a. A Draft Vision to Guide Community-Oriented AFE Systems Reform

Part 3.a. presents a brief, four-part "draft vision statement" that those who want to create community-oriented AFE systems might adapt to guide their work:

- Purposes: empowerment of learners, community stakeholders, and AFE itself.

- Partners: adult learners and the diverse social communities they participate in (e.g., their families; neighborhoods; workplaces; labor unions; healthcare, criminal justice, and other service providers; democratic institutions).

- Practices: use of AFE professionals who understand the learners and communities to be served; involve other relevant stakeholders; use effective practices for instruction and program management; continuously monitor and improve services; and invest adequate, timely, and sustained financial and in-kind supports.

- Principles: respect, resourcefulness, resilience, reason, relevance and responsiveness, constructive collaboration, commitment to high quality, honor, honesty, and humility.

Readers are encouraged to review this draft and then create and periodically update their own statement that reflects their own experience, values, and realities.

Part 3. b. Voices from the AFE Field

Prior to and since the mid-1990s (when the shift toward a more employment-focused AFE described in Book 2 got underway), diverse voices from the AFE field have made the case that AFE should:

- respond more effectively to a wide range of interests, needs, and realities of more learners and other stakeholders. AFE can, for example, support such societal institutions as democracy and social justice, family development, criminal justice reform and public safety, and public health.

- see "community" as both a venue and goal for AFE. AFE should recognize that learners come to programs to be better able to participate effectively in various social contexts (communities) and that instruction and other supports should be focused on contextualized uses of basic skills that are meaningful to learners.

- use participatory, contextualized approaches to instruction and collaborative, integrated strategies for working with other community stakeholders.

- help to empower learners to understand and manage challenges and opportunities they and their communities face.

- be organized as systems of integrated educational and other supports for learners rather than as isolated and uncoordinated "programs."

- provide supports not only to learners and their communities but to other AFE providers (through collaborative sharing of resources and expertise, advocacy, referral systems, etc.).

- learn from past and current AFE efforts, to maximize efficiency and avoid unnecessary reinvention of the wheel.

Part 3.c. Voices from Other Fields

In addition to the above-described advocates from the AFE field, others operating in public- and private-sector institutions have also been calling for some of the elements reflected in the above messages from AFE advocates. (Those elements include stakeholder collaborations, integrated services, systems-thinking, responsiveness to customer needs, high-performance work organizations, evidence-based decision making, community-building, strengths-based development, and responding to inequities.) By studying these models from other fields, AFE advocates might find inspiration, ideas, information, and partners that they can apply to their own work in AFE.

Book 4: Community-Oriented AFE at the Local Level

Part 4.a. Planning and Implementing Community-Oriented AFE Projects: How Stakeholders Can Get Started

Parts 3.a, 3.b., and 3.c. described a vision and arguments community-oriented AFE. Outlined in Part 4.a. are actions that those wishing to create, implement, continuously strengthen, and sustain community-oriented AFE might use to get started. (Such actions might be undertaken within a single AFE program or by a coalition/network of several AFE programs.) Readers are encouraged to adapt these strategies in ways that are relevant, do-able, and helpful to the stakeholders and contexts involved.

The actions are broken into five stages:

STAGE 1: Conduct a community learning needs assessment.

STAGE 2: Introduce the idea of "community-oriented AFE" to forward-thinking AFE colleagues.

STAGE 3: Create a "Community-Oriented AFE Project Team" to identify project options.

STAGE 4: Prepare for one or more initial pilot projects.

STAGE 6: Implement, evaluate, and reflect on the pilot project(s) and decide next steps.

The actions described in this Part 4.a. are adapted from other AFE innovators who have developed collaborative ways to introduce new concepts and practices into our field.

Part. 4.b. What Community-Oriented AFE Might Look Like at a Local Level

Part 4.b. provides 44 examples of actual AFE projects – both recent and past – that in various ways fit the criteria for community-oriented adult foundational education described in Parts 3.a., 3.b., and 3.c. The sample projects are organized into these twelve categories:

- AFE for Problem Solving in Work and Life
- AFE Partnerships for Health
- AFE Partnerships for Environmental Sustainability
- AFE Partnerships for Managing Financial and In-Kind Resources
- Adult Numeracy Partnerships
- AFE Partnerships for Families
- AFE Partnerships for Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Individuals
- AFE for Women
- Writing for Reflection, Expression, and Action
- Digital Literacy for a Digitized World
- AFE for New Careers
- Learner-Centered Assessment and Evaluation

Each project serves a particular community of learners; helps learners deal with relevant life issues; uses participatory, contextualized instructional practices; collaborates with relevant community stakeholders; and is planned and implemented by professionals equipped with appropriate instructional and other tools.

Readers are encouraged to review these examples as well as other related information cited in this resource book series. Readers can then decide whether and how they might incorporate elements of these examples into their own efforts to create community-oriented AFE. They might also use the references and links provided to learn more about these examples and others like them.

Book 5: What We Can Do to Generate Supports & Supporters for Community-Oriented AFE

Part 5.a. Supports and Supporters Needed for Community-Oriented AFE

Transitioning current U.S. AFE efforts to a community-oriented model will require a significantly stronger infrastructure of supports than is currently provided for AFE.

Part 5.a. summarizes the financial, in-kind, and volunteer supports and policies that effective community-oriented AFE services require; potential sources of those supports; and what those supports would be used for (i.e., for staffing; professional development; facilities; technologies for learning, management, and other functions; partnerships; public outreach; and research and development).

Putting such an infrastructure in place and sustaining it will require new, collaborative ways of thinking, acting, and investing by a variety of familiar and other stakeholders at local, state, and national levels. Though challenging, this work can and should learn from and build on informative models of AFE policy, funding, professional development, partnerships, research, and advocacy already developed and currently underway in the field.

Part 5.b. What We Can Do to Move Community-Oriented Systems Reform Forward

The preceding parts of this book series make the case for a community-oriented approach to AFE in the U.S. and describe the supports that community-oriented AFE would need and various stakeholders who could provide such supports.

But the field currently lacks a strong, sustained advocacy effort to generate the kinds of supports that community-oriented AFE systems would need. The former advocates for this view (described in Part 3.b. and 4.b.) have largely – though not entirely – disappeared from the field due to closing of institutions, retirement, and the policy shifts and other factors described in Book 2.

The good news is that there are arguments, research, models, and experienced AFE professionals within a number of institutions at national, state, and local levels that can be incorporated into new advocacy efforts for community-oriented AFE.

Outlined below are actions that proponents of community-oriented AFE might take to build and launch effective advocacy within key institutions at national, state, and local levels. It will be important to keep in mind that this version of advocacy must be different from the more common one which tends to focus on maintaining funding to support the current way of doing AFE. (Yes, there are at this writing some efforts underway to get new funding for digital literacy and a few other areas of innovation, but they generally don't explicitly advocate for the community-oriented model described in this resource book – though they could do so with some extra work.)

The advocacy strategy proposed in Part 5.b. focuses directly on generating financial and in-kind supports for the reforming of U.S. AFE in ways that are consistent with the community-oriented vision proposed in this resource book. The strategy is organized in four actions:

> Action 1: Create an initial national leadership team of advocates for community-oriented AFE to lay the groundwork for a capacity-building initiative.

> Action 2: Form a coordinating team and task forces at national and other levels to create advocacy plans to generate supports for a series of activities that build the capacities required for community-oriented AFE.

> Action 3: Disseminate drafts of the advocacy plans to the field and invite input and involvement from AFE practitioners and others to further refine those plans.

> Action 4: Implement the advocacy plans by reaching out to potential supporters, monitoring their responses, and adjusting the plans in light of the responses of potential supporters.

Such advocacy will require different ways of thinking about the purposes, practices, partners, and principles of AFE.

Part 5.c. Collaborative Initiatives that Have Supported Local Level AFE Innovations

Those who want to shift AFE services to a more community-oriented model face two challenges:

1. How to create community-oriented AFE services at the program level.
2. How to generate support for this kind of work in ways that will not only help individual programs but allow community-oriented programs to continue to grow in quantity and quality.

Books 3 and 4 have provided information that can be used to respond to the first challenge. Parts 5.b and 5.c suggest strategies that advocates for community-oriented AFE can take to deal with the second challenge of creating significant numbers of community-oriented AFE projects to support wider-scale systems reform.

Part 5.c. describes examples of past and more recent public- and private-sector initiatives that have generated supports for the development of diverse AFE innovations on a large scale:

- Example 1: Development of Participatory Models of AFE
- Example 2: Employer Support for Workplace AFE
- Example 3: Labor Union Support for Worker AFE
- Example 4: Urban AFE Collaborations
- Example 5: Learner Leadership Development
- Example 6: AFE for Families
- Example 7: AFE for Health
- Example 8: Private-Sector Support for AFE
- Example 9: College Student Involvement in AFE

Those interested in working with various stakeholder groups to build supports for community-oriented AFE should learn about these and similar examples and consider how these earlier models might be updated and applied to AFE efforts today.

Community-Oriented Leadership Required

Transitioning AFE to a more community-oriented approach has many potential benefits for diverse learners and other stakeholders. But creating such

models will require new thinking, significant commitment, and good organization which in turn will require professionals who are equipped and paid to do the organizing, documenting, facilitation, and other programming and administrative tasks that collaborations require.

Community-oriented AFE will thus require strong leadership. Leaders will need to be guided by the kind of vision described in Part 3.a. and have expertise in the how's of both community-oriented AFE and advocacy. But all of these leaders need to be supported, so they can develop their leadership abilities, put them to work, and learn from and build on the experience. Building forward-thinking leadership is what community-oriented AFE can do for adult learners and their communities, and we should adapt that idea to our own development as a profession.

Introduction

Why this Resource Book Series Was Written

For at least four decades, advocates have made the case for adult foundational education (AFE)[1] as a tool for helping (a) adult learners to better their own lives and (b) learners' families, communities, and other stakeholders to achieve important economic and social outcomes such as economic security, public health, children's academic success, and public safety.

These arguments continue to be made and supported in a steady stream of documents, webinars, and projects produced by advocacy groups, researchers, funders, and other stakeholders. Too often, these resources pile up, aren't widely read, aren't shared, and aren't used in a coordinated way. Old issues and ideas are regularly rediscovered and sometimes added to and updated, but underlying policies and ways of thinking and doing AFE often remain essentially the same. And the involvement of stakeholders, including adult learner groups, employers, labor unions, foundations, and research institutions, doesn't increase -- and in many cases it has decreased if not disappeared.

I was an early supporter of the idea of work-related AFE and for many years have participated in a series of projects to develop work-related learning supports for incumbent workers and job seekers. However, as federal funding for the field shifted toward a greater focus on workforce education in the 1990s, I became concerned that the ways that work-related AFE was talked about were often not well conceived, the content and methodologies of many workforce AFE programs were not of good quality, and the supports for this important work were fleeting. At the same time, the field was ignoring the many other learner and societal goals that could be achieved with high quality AFE. And the field was not adequately involving other stakeholders as partners.

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[1] See Glossary in Appendix for an explanation of the term *adult foundational education* ("AFE"). Part 2.a. of this series also provides a more in-depth description of AFE in the U.S.

I (and other colleagues with whom I was working) were also concerned about the phenomenon of institutional memory loss within U.S. AFE. Too often, it seemed that decision-makers at all levels and within all institutions in the field were unaware of and unconcerned about past valuable work that could be learned from and built on. Discourse in the field sometimes seems surreal, as if the past never happened and we simply just need to continually start from scratch and reinvent the wheel.

Starting in 2018, I began working with AFE colleagues to produce a series of articles, guidebooks, position papers, and webinars that promoted a different way of looking at work-related AFE as well as AFE more generally. Borrowing from the valuable (and increasingly forgotten and ignored) work of other forward-thinking colleagues, I adopted the term *community-oriented*[2] to describe an approach to AFE which was more comprehensive and relevant in terms of the learners served, other partners involved, learner and societal needs responded to, content and methodologies used, and supports given to learners and service providers.

This resource book series is the latest of those documents. The series originally began as a single book but – after four months of writing in summer of 2023 – had morphed for readability's sake into several smaller volumes. The series is intended to serve as a resource for those who want to strengthen and expand foundational education and other related supports for adults and out-of-school youth in the United States. Potential users include AFE service providers, adult learner leaders, funders, policy makers, researchers, and other stakeholders (e.g., various kinds of social service providers, employers, unions, community organizations) interested in partnering with AFE. (These "other stakeholders" will be described in more detail throughout the books.) The series might also be useful to newcomers to AFE who want to know more about valuable work already done in the field which they might adapt in their own work.

The series presents:

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[2] See Glossary in Appendix for an explanation of the term *community-oriented*.

- o an overview of the learners and institutions involved in U.S. adult foundational education;
- strengths and limitations of current AFE efforts;
- arguments for multi-purpose, collaborative, empowerment-focused AFE systems that expand on the strengths of the current collections of AFE services to better serve more learners and other stakeholders;
- models of community-oriented programs that readers might learn from and adapt;
- actions that AFE providers and partners might take to create community-oriented services relevant to their own organizations, learners, and communities;
- actions that advocates might take to secure support for their own programs and for community-oriented AFE more generally.

This series is admittedly hefty and detailed. Readers are encouraged to read its parts selectively, with the idea that this is a resource that can be revisited periodically for relevant information -- and inspiration. (No need to swallow it all in one gulp.)

I offer this at a time when our society is facing many challenges – to economic security, democracy, social cohesion, public health, environmental sustainability, among others. AFE and the learners we serve can – in effective partnerships with other stakeholders -- be a positive force for strengthening our communities and nation.

How this Resource Book Series Was Written

To write this resource book series, I drew on extensive literature reviews of four decades of AFE reports and articles; responses to a survey sent to AFE practitioners; interviews with national AFE leaders; written feedback from reviewers of several drafts; and my own work in multiple roles, institutions, and projects in the AFE field within the U.S. and other countries. (In particular, I'm pulling from the documents I wrote with input from dozens of colleagues between 2018 and 2023. These can be viewed here: www.pauljurmo.info .)

Its contents were assembled over five months from several drafts. The five books are organized as follows:

Book 1: Series Summary and Introduction

Book 2: Our Adult Foundational Education Report Card

Book 3: Vision & Voices for Multi-Purpose, Collaborative, Empowerment-Focused AFE

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Book 5: What We Can Do to Generate Supports & Supporters for Community-Oriented AFE

Each book comes with a list of references used and (in an appendix) a glossary of key terms used.

This unfunded work was done by volunteers. Further revisions might be made to the series as additional ideas, information, interest, and opportunities emerge.

Acknowledgments

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- the many individuals and institutions who have supported the work described in this series.
- those – my family, friends, teachers, co-workers, employers, unions, and funders -- who have given me many opportunities to participate and learn.

As this paper's author, however, I take sole responsibility for its contents.

I welcome comments, questions, and constructive dialogue from readers and users. Best wishes,

Paul Jurmo, Ed.D.

Washington, DC, October 28, 2023
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A P P E N D I X

Glossary

Adult foundational education (AFE)

This term was introduced by the Open Door Collective (ODC) in 2022, to provide a name that more fully captured the diverse types of services provided in adult literacy/basic skills, English for Speakers of Other Languages, high school equivalency ("GED"), and other related programs (e.g., workplace/workforce basic skills, citizenship preparation, health and family literacy programs). For more about how the ODC defined this term, visit https://nationalcoalitionforliteracy.org/2022/05/adult-foundational-education/ and https://docs.google.com/document/d/1BTroPf5NCwcQIy_drWO5pzd44GE2fbmWNp71VyrqZCc/edit

Because I have long agreed that our multi-dimensional field needs a more comprehensive and accurate way of describing itself, I have adopted this term "adult foundational education" ("AFE ") and use it throughout this resource book series, adding my own interpretations of the term. (See a more detailed description of "AFE in the U.S." in Part 2.a.)

I also recognize that others in the field might not want to use this term and use other terms like "adult literacy education," "adult basic education," "English for Speakers of Other languages education," "high school equivalency education," or simply "adult education." I hope that this discussion of "What do we call ourselves?" is not a source of confusion, distraction, and division. I hope that this discussion instead helps us better understand the learners and communities we serve, what we can do to better serve them, and how talk about our field internally and externally.

In Part 2.a. of this series, I present my own interpretation of this term, based on my years of study and work in AFE and related fields. Though it does not use the exact wording used by ODC, I believe that how I describe AFE is in keeping with the general sense and spirit of ODC's definition. ODC itself has also encouraged the field to help to further develop this term.

In a nutshell, I'm saying that *adult foundational education (AFE)* refers to the diverse types of instructional and other services that help U.S. adults and out-of-school youth to (a) strengthen their "foundational skills" (e.g., oral and written language, numeracy, digital literacy, problem-solving, collaboration, and others); (b) build social-emotional strengths; (c) develop content knowledge; and (c) develop credentials, personal plans, support systems, and other tools they need to perform work, family, civic, and academic roles. AFE services are based in multiple institutions and communities, serve diverse populations of adults and out-of-school youth, and often involve other stakeholder partners.

Community-oriented adult foundational education

This is an approach that focuses AFE services on helping learners participate effectively in the various *communities* (social contexts) they operate in. *Communities* are not limited to geographic neighborhoods but can include settings like workplaces, families, healthcare facilities, prisons, clubs, religious institutions, social services, and other social contexts where learners use foundational skills to communicate and solve problems with others. The term *community-oriented* is borrowed from Hanna Arlene Fingeret (1992)[3] who used it in a 1992 ERIC monograph and from the *community-based* adult literacy movement of the 1980s and 1990s. As used in this document, *community-oriented* AFE programs often work with other stakeholders who provide supports that help learners manage particular life issues they are concerned about. Such an integrated, collaborative, community-oriented approach can, in turn, also help those other stakeholders be better able to work with basic-skills-challenged adults and the AFE programs that serve them. In these ways, *community* is both a venue and resource for, and a product of, adult foundational education.

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[3] Fingeret, H.A. (1992). *Adult literacy education: Current and future directions: An update.* ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED354391