

# Activists, Academics, and Administrators: Why and How They Have Attempted to Reform U.S. Adult Education

A Presentation at COABE 2022 by Paul Jurmo and Federico Salas-Isnardi

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# Activists, Academics, and Administrators: Why and How They Have Attempted to Reform U.S. Adult Education

## Welcome

While we wait to begin, please use the chat to introduce yourself:

- Your name, organization, and role;
- One “innovation” in adult education that you are aware of.

# Your presenters

- Paul Jurmo: Consultant, Basic Skills for Development, Washington, DC, [www.pauljurmo.info](http://www.pauljurmo.info) , [pjurmo@comcast.net](mailto:pjurmo@comcast.net)
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# About this presentation

- Draws on presenters' research and experience in diverse areas of adult education in the U.S. and other countries over multiple decades.
- Responds to recent efforts to re-think the why's and how's of adult education during a time for our field and nation that presents both challenges and opportunities.
- Emphasizes the importance of adapting lessons learned from both past and recent experience to guide continuous improvement of our work.

# Our objectives

Participants will be better able to . . .

1. Define key terms discussed today (adult education, basic/foundational skills, innovation, systems reform).
2. Describe examples of innovations and reforms in U.S. adult education.
3. Describe the current status of innovations and reforms in our field.
4. Identify actions that might be taken to build more effective systems of supports and opportunities for U.S. adult learners.
5. Access relevant resources on these topics.

# Q1: What do we mean by . . . ?

- adult education (aka, adult basic education): instructional and other services designed to help adults and out-of-school youth develop (a) basic skills, (b) secondary education credentials, (c) social-emotional strengths (e.g., self-efficacy), (d) technical/background knowledge, and (e) educational plans they need to achieve personally meaningful goals.
- adult basic (or foundational) skills include . . .
  - “literacy” (reading, writing, speaking, listening), “numeracy” (applied math), “digital,” and other skills (research, planning, collaboration . . .) required for communicating and solving problems in meaningful work, family, civic, and lifelong learning roles.
- adult education innovation: a new concept, practice, or tool to help adult learners and educators succeed;
- systems reform: a multi-dimensional effort to transition adult education to a better way of operating. (May include adopting a number of innovations in a coordinated way.)

Q2.a: What are examples of innovations and reforms in U.S. adult basic skills education in the past four decades?

To start, let's review the "adult education innovations" that you identified in your personal introductions.

## Q2.b: Innovations starting in the 1980s . . .

Adult education has had a flurry of initiatives that -- in various ways -- have aimed at developing new models of service provision for diverse purposes and learner populations.

These initiatives . . . .

- expanded the focal points (purposes, learners, partners . . .) for adult education;
- developed new models of instruction and assessment, policy-making, funding, professional development, leadership, partnerships and networks, uses of technology, research, awareness-raising -- building blocks of adult education systems.



## Q2.c: Factors contributing to innovation

Adult education innovations have evolved in response to:

- social, economic, and political trends (including changing demographics, job demands and labor markets, social justice concerns . . . );
- advocacy and leadership within adult education, public policy, and other stakeholder groups;
- funding;
- media coverage;
- research;
- new technologies for communicating, working, and learning.

## Q2.d: Feature #1: A general shift toward...

- contextualized learning (blending basic skills development with learning of other skill/knowledge areas);
- integrated partnerships that coordinated education with other initiatives to respond to both:
  - community needs
  - learner needs

Q2.e:

## Feature #2: Leadership from . . .

- government policy makers, funders, and agencies;
- adult education organizations, networks, and individual professionals;
- research institutions (universities and others);
- other stakeholders (e.g., foundations, businesses, employers, labor unions, correctional organizations, early childhood specialists, organizations serving particular communities . . . );
- adult learners.

## Q2.f: Feature #3: Special “innovation initiatives” for . . .

### a. Integrated services including . . .

- “Workplace literacy” for diverse incumbent worker populations, industries, job skills. . . );
- “Workforce readiness” for unemployed and under-employed job-seekers;
- “Intergenerational literacy” for parents/caregivers and their young children;
- “Citizenship ed” to help immigrants and refugees gain citizenship & integrate into U.S.;
- “Correctional & re-entry ed” to help individuals with criminal records integrate into productive roles in their families and communities;
- “Community-oriented” programs (some with roots in the civil rights movement) to enable individuals to understand, deal with, avoid systemic barriers -- and possibly eliminate them through collective action.

# Q2.g: Feature #3: Special “innovation initiatives” for. . .

## 3.b. Collaborative planning and sharing of financial and in-kind resources . . .

- via national, state, and local planning/coordinating bodies (e.g., literacy coalitions, task forces, commissions . . . )
- with support of media, foundations, state and local governments.

# Q2.h: Feature #3: Special “innovation initiatives” for . . .

## 3.c. Collaborative professional development via . . .

- State, regional, and local literacy resource centers;
- LINCS (National Institute for Literacy’s and U.S. Dept of Ed’s on-line discussions and resource collections on diverse topics);
- National research dissemination centers (e.g., ERIC-ACVE at Ohio State; National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy; National Institute for Literacy; centers at Penn State, Univ of Tennessee, Georgia State U., U. of Penn, and others).
- Leadership development for adult learners and college students.
- NIFL Literacy Leader Fellowships.

# Q2.i: Feature #3: Special “innovation initiatives” for . . .

## 3.d. Other areas

- Learner leadership development (via VALUEUSA, local and state learner groups, Laubach Literacy Action and Literacy Volunteers of America . . . );
- Using educational technologies (video and computers) to help learners develop “traditional” basic skills and “newer” digital skills;
- Specialized curricula for diverse learner populations (e.g., English language learners, people with disabilities, women . . . ) and for particular basic skills (e.g., numeracy).

## Q2.j: How early innovations were developed, supported, and used . . .

- Developed in pilot/demonstration projects funded by public and private sources;
- Evaluated, documented, and shared via clearinghouses, reports, networks, conferences and other professional training, and ongoing special funding.

Not all innovations “took root” (due to evolving conditions and needs, design problems, financial or opportunity costs, decline in funding, lack of visibility, changes in leadership . . .)

But some of what was learned in early innovations has been adapted and incorporated into current areas of adult education (even if not recognized).



Before we move to “systems reforms,”  
do you have . . .

Any questions or comments about the early innovations?

## Q2.1: *In addition to individual types of innovations . . .*

- Adult educators and partners attempted to re-think how to **build new systems of educational and other supports for learners** at national, state, and local levels.
- “Systems reform” efforts attempted to:
  - build on research and innovations;
  - Involve more stakeholders in planning, implementing, and supporting services;
  - improve coordination among services and stakeholders;
  - customize services to needs of learners and communities;
  - adapt organizational development concepts to better align supports with customer needs.

## Q2.m: *An important example of a “systems reform” effort*

“Equipped for the Future” (EFF) was an “adult education systems reform” initiative of the National Institute for Literacy (from the mid-1990s to early 2000s).

NIFL was an independent agency of the federal government that grew out of the growth in interest in adult literacy that emerged in the later 1980s and early 1990s.

## Q2.n: What EFF did

*EFF drew on existing and new research to . . .*

- Develop a more comprehensive definition of the basic skills that adults need for work, family, and civic roles.
- Identify guidelines for and examples of effective instruction and assessment.
- Clarify the expertise that adult educators (teachers, administrators) need to provide effective services and create corresponding models of professional development for adult educators.
- Identify the policy, funding, and other supports that adult education programs need and advocate for such supports from public and private sources.
- Field-test and continuously improve the above ideas and models and share the results via publications, conferences, and other mechanisms.

## Q2.o: Supporters of EFF

*EFF was supported by . . .*

- State adult education and workforce agencies
- The Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy
- ProLiteracy
- A network of university-based research centers
- Several trade associations (e.g., retail, healthcare . . .)
- Other agencies and organizations

## Q2.p: What happened to EFF and NIFL?

Despite the support it received and the resources it generated, EFF (and the parent National Institute for Literacy) were defunded and closed in the early 2000s.

The valuable products it generated can be hard to find on-line.

But elements of EFF live on today – *and should be revisited.*

## Q3.a: What is the current status of “innovation” and “systems reform” in our field?

*Though many early innovations have faded from sight, new versions of innovations and reforms continue:*

- WIOA supports integration/coordination of services to help learners advance in careers and education.
- LINCS, state literacy resource centers, ProLiteracy, COABE, the American Institutes for Research, World Education, and others share resources (via workshops and publications) related to a range of innovations and themes.
- VALUEUSA and COABE support learner leadership. *(cont'd.)*

## Q3.b: What is the current status of “innovation” and “reform” in our field?

- The Change Agent Magazine and some individual programs continue to develop models of adult education for social justice.
- EdTech Center and others are developing educational technologies.
- National Coalition for Literacy and others advocate for policy and funding.
- Open Door Collective has developed resources related to diverse integrated partnerships.
- Barbara Bush Foundation is calling for innovations and improvements in professional development and other areas.



### Q3.c:

**But despite the significant, positive efforts of many in our field, we face significant challenges as a profession.**

- Many potentially promising, innovative efforts tend to be scattered and not coordinated.
- Past valuable resources are not made easily available to the field.
- Advocacy tends to focus on “funding” without adequately dealing with “*For what?*”
- Investment remains limited for building (a) a strong, professional adult education workforce and (b) well-designed supports for learners.
- As a result, the efficiency and reach of services remain limited.

## Q3.d: Where might we go from here?

Some advocates are . . .

. . . calling for a renewed focus on “systems reform.”

. . . exploring how to transition adult education to community-oriented systems of supports for adult learners which . . .

- are more relevant,
- are more efficient (in using evidence-based practices and partnerships),
- serve and involve more learners, communities, and other stakeholders,
- are better sustained.

Q4.a: How might we build on prior innovations and reforms to advocate for more effective systems of educational and other supports and opportunities for adult learners?

Your Assignment

Please use the chat to briefly tell us . . .

*What might be 1-2 characteristics of a more effective adult education system in your state or community?*

**Q4.b: How might we build on prior innovations and reforms to advocate for more effective systems of educational and other supports and opportunities for adult learners?**

*Let's hear what you have said about . . .*

*What might be 1-2 characteristics of a more effective adult education system in your state or community?*

## Q4.c:

# One Example: A New Reform Effort in Houston

- Creation of MOAL with the goal to support access to necessary skills for ALL adults.
- Focused on Functional Literacy within three literacy domains (Digital-Health-Financial) and a completely reimagined approach to “literacy.”
- Developed an Adult Literacy Blueprint to serve as our 15-year strategic plan for adult literacy in the city.
- Reimagined the “literacy ecosystem” by bringing new and old partners to the table.
- We are making literacy a topic of conversation in each and every forum to which we “invite ourselves.”

## Q4.d: One Example: A New Reform Effort in Houston – Early Outcomes

- Literacy featured in the news. Frontpage of our Houston Chronicle for the very first time.
- Literacy mentioned in public speeches by the Mayor and other elected officials.
- Our office featured in the national news.
- Houston invited to participate in a number of national initiatives supporting adult literacy.
- Literacy made a “funding priority” by the Mayor.
- We are starting new initiatives and a large digital literacy project.

*(Federico will be talking about this in detail on Wednesday at 11:15 EDT/1:15 CDT at a hybrid session.)*

## Q4.e: A 5-step strategic planning process: Overview.

- Adapts similar processes developed in adult education and other fields.
- Involves key stakeholders (adult educators, learners, and partners ).
- Can be adapted for national, state, community, and institutional levels.
- Takes steps to . . .
  1. Evaluate current services (strengths, needed improvements . . .)
  2. Use research to inform planning.
  3. Develop a proposal for a more effective system of educational and other supports (based on understanding the basic skills problems to be dealt with)
  4. Pilot the new systems model.
  5. Provide effective (principled, informed, organized, sustained) leadership.

# A few minutes for . . .

- Questions?

- Comments?



## Q5: Where can we find more resources on these topics?

- Access the “Resource List” containing links to relevant resources and the presenters. (Paul will make this Resource Sheet and PowerPoint available on the COABE conference site and on [www.pauljurmo.info](http://www.pauljurmo.info) .)
- Participate in other COABE workshops on related issues (including Federico’s session about Houston).

# Wrap-up

- Thanks for participating today.
- Please complete the workshop evaluation if you can.
- Keep up the good work!