

"FUNCTIONAL CONTEXT" VS "GENERAL" LITERACY

Current Issues in Adult Literacy

Dolores Perin

DISCUSSION IN
IRA ADULT LITERACY
SIG NEWSLETTERS
(1994 VOLS, ISSUES 2+3
+4)

Greetings! I will start by reporting that I had a grand total of three responses to my first column, in which I laid out a series of issues in adult literacy for your reaction. The three contributions I received were very interesting but I will delay discussion of them until the next column, by which time I hope more of the readership will have responded! At this point, I would like to ask for responses to ISSUES 3 (transfer of literacy beyond the classroom), 5 (increasing "time on task" outside of the classroom), 6 (learner-centered program design and decision-making), and 9 (broadening the scope of a workplace literacy curriculum) only. These were the issues which produced responses. In order to deepen the discussion, I hope you will take some time and share your experiences with all of us (see ALSIG Newsletter, Winter 1993, page 4, for more information about these issues).

In the meantime, I would like to draw attention to another issue, related to workplace literacy, which was raised by Dr. Paul Jurmo in a discussion we had recently and really got me thinking: "Functional context" vs. "general" literacy: A false dichotomy? Paul Jurmo is an adult literacy specialist who has much experience in planning, evaluating and researching literacy programs, especially in the workplace. He generously summarized his thoughts on the above-mentioned issue as follows:

Influential researchers and funders tell us that workplace literacy programs have two instructional approaches to choose from: the "functional context" approach and the "general literacy" approach. In functional context instruction, learners practice the uses of basic skills they need at work. "General literacy" is a catch-all for everything else, including drill-and-practice workbooks, GED classes, and "learner-centered" instruction.

Proponents of the functional context view argue:

1. "Research": Research shows learners learn best through regular practice of real applications to serve meaningful purposes in real contexts. "General literacy" is either not grounded in any context or focuses on contexts which are not relevant in the workplace.
2. "Practicality": Given the minuscule instructional time available in most workplace programs, learners must focus on high-priority, attainable learning objectives, which they can reinforce through practice in their daily work lives. "General literacy" is too unfocused, trying to cover too many objectives.

3. "Politics": To convince employers to invest in education, we must show that their bottom line economic interests are served. "General literacy" doesn't improve job performance. Functional context proponents generally rely on a literacy task analysis process in which education specialists define workers' learning needs.

This interpretation of functional context has become what some see as a "new orthodoxy" shaping policy and practice. It unfortunately overlooks the following realities:

1. Program stakeholders commonly hope programs will achieve not just enhanced job performance but personal growth for workers, as well.
2. Employers increasingly want employees who can take responsibility, make decisions, work in teams, and know a broad range of jobs.
3. If supervisors and learners aren't involved in program decision-making, programs are weak.
4. Workers participate not only in their workplace communities but in many other communities (family, neighborhood, social groups, etc.). These communities are contexts where workers can practice what they are learning in a workplace program and vice versa.
5. Not all "non-functional-context" programs are the same. Lumping drill books, GED programs, "learner centered," and all other approaches into one "general" category is misleading and insulting.

The "functional context vs. general literacy" dichotomy is a false one. It is distracting us from critically examining who program stakeholders are, what they hope to achieve, and the learning resources available to learners inside and outside the workplace. And it is discouraging us from creating new, collaborative ways of using education to help workplaces shift toward team-based, thoughtful ways of doing work.

DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE with Paul Jurmo's view on this issue? If you wish to respond, please send me a short summary of your ideas (Dr. Dolores Perin, CASE, CUNY Graduate School, 25 W. 43rd Street, Room 620NC, New York, NY 10036). Δ

Current Issues

Larry Mikulecky Replies to Paul Jurmo

Dr. Paul Jurmo wrote some provocative thoughts on "functional context" versus "general" literacy in the Current Issues column in the Winter 1994 issue. We have received the following response from Dr. Larry Mikulecky, well known for research and evaluation in the adult literacy field.

Larry Mikulecky's reply:

I would like to think Paul Jurmo was correct and we have a false dichotomy here, but my experience tells me this is not the case. I have found a few programs which anchor nearly all learning in a variety of meaningful contexts which range from workplace to reading for personal goals to preparing for further training. In these few cases, the dichotomy may be false. It is especially false if the course is anchored in a life-long learning program from which dozens of learning experiences are possible and in which learners participate over several years. I don't think there are very many programs like this. I wish there were.

More typically, learners have access to very limited instruction. I think even here a mix of learner goals and workplace goals is best. Unfortunately, GED courses and general ESL courses using off-the-shelf exercises are present in many (perhaps most) workplace literacy programs. Instructors are hired like babysitters (i.e. only paid for time supervising learners) and have limited possibility to construct customized materials with any functional context in mind. Since it is a part-time, over-load job for many, more involvement isn't really desired

by the teacher, either. Time for preparation isn't available and if it were, a new person would have to be hired to use the time effectively.

The most effective programs I've seen expand practice time with homework modules and materials, draw upon every available opportunity for literacy (e.g. workplace, home, further schooling), and use class time with about the following mix: 70% emphasis on using reading and writing; 30% emphasis on conversation focused on literacy processes, feedback to learners on their accomplishments, and connecting learning to future goals and plans.

Our data show less emphasis on reading and writing practice (i.e. less than 50%) is related to lack of learner performance gain. Lack of focused discussion is related to lack of gain in learners' sense of efficacy and lack of gain in strategy use.

We have seen a few effective programs. Maybe these are the ones for which general vs. functional context is a false dichotomy.

I applaud Paul Jurmo's attempt to keep us from senselessly choosing up sides. I hope he isn't providing a false resolution by suggesting that there really isn't a problem here. Δ



WHAT DO YOU THINK?



Send a maximum of 100 words to Dr. Dolores Perin, CASE/CUNY Graduate School, 25 W. 43rd Street, Rm. 620, New York, NY 10036 or e-mail to dpa@cunyvms1.gc.cuny.edu.



Current Issues in Adult Literacy: Dolores Perin

FUNCTIONAL CONTEXT LITERACY: CONTINUING THE DISCUSSION

In the Winter 1994 issue, Dr. Paul Jurmo expressed some ideas about "functional context" and "general" literacy. Dr. Larry Mikulecky's reaction appeared in the Spring 1994 issue, and now, Dr. Nickie Askov, Director of the Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy and nationally known in the adult literacy field, has entered the debate. Dr. Askov's comments appear below, followed by Dr. Jurmo's rejoinder to both her and Dr. Mikulecky's views.

Dr. Askov: I agree with Paul Jurmo that "functional context" versus "general literacy" is a false dichotomy. Just as he says that one cannot lump together all practices that are not functional context under the category of general literacy, I would like to point out that there are many variations in the application of the term functional context.

Some of the early proponents of the functional context approach suggested that one had to replicate the exact diagram or directions required at work in order to get transfer back to the job. However, the problem has been that job materials change and people did not learn generalizable literacy skills.

In contrast, our use of functional context has always been at a mid-level of specificity that focuses on the skill but not at such a specific level that people can't generalize beyond the exact literacy material. By teaching at a more general skill level while still focusing on the job (or whatever offers the functional context), and by embedding problem-solving and metacognitive skills into the skill instruction, one can achieve transfer both to the job and to general literacy skills. Deliberate teaching for transfer seems to make the difference and requires astute instructors who are coordinating closely with job supervisors as well as encouraging literacy activities at work.

WHAT'S YOUR OPINION? EXPRESS YOUR THOUGHTS!

Send a maximum of 100 words to Dr. Dolores Perin, CASE/CUNY Graduate School, 25 W. 43rd Street, Rm. 620, New York, NY 10036 or e-mail to dpa@cunyvms1.gc.cuny.edu.

Deadlines for submitting articles and information to the ALSIG Newsletter:

Vol. 6, No. 1	October 15, 1994
Vol. 6, No. 2	December 15, 1994
Vol. 6, No. 3	February 15, 1995
Vol. 6, No. 4	April 30, 1995

Jurmo responds to Mikulecky and Askov: I originally argued that, when "functional context" is interpreted too narrowly and in too "top-down" a way, workplace programs run the risk of being essentially irrelevant. Content is irrelevant when programs focus on specific job tasks which (1) become outdated when jobs change and (2) are not what motivated learners and other stakeholders to get involved in the first place. The program-development process is outdated if it uses an old-fashioned, top-down decision-making process rather than involving learners, supervisors, and other key stakeholders in setting goals and monitoring progress. Such collaborative decision-making is required in the new workplace.

I was pleased that Dr. Mikulecky and Dr. Askov supported several of my points. Dr. Mikulecky, for example, said programs ideally would "anchor nearly all learning in a variety of meaningful contexts which range from workplace to reading for personal goals to preparing for further training... (part of) a life-long learning program (with) dozens of learning experiences... over several years." "Most effective programs... draw upon every available opportunity for literacy (e.g., workplace, home, further schooling)..."

Dr. Askov states that some early proponents of the functional context approach focused too narrowly on particular existing jobs which, unfortunately, were subject to change, thereby limiting learners' ability to transfer skills to other tasks. She argues for a broader focus, characterized by "deliberate teaching for transfer" and "instructors who are coordinating closely with job supervisors as well as encouraging literacy activities outside work."

The space allowed in this column — although welcomed — is nowhere near enough to discuss the many lessons learned in the past ten years of workplace education experience. We need to create opportunities for ourselves to learn from each other — to analyze and communicate — and to create an active constituency for good practice. Δ