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## Learner Voice: How Learner-Centered Programming Affects Teacher-Centered Instruction

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# **Learner Voice: How Learner-Centered Programming Affects Teacher-Centered Instruction**

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**Abstract:** Similar to other research in adult literacy education, my study confirms that adult literacy education primarily focuses on building discrete skills. However, when one examines the programming decisions that administrators make, there is a difference in how and what students learn in the classroom.

## **Purpose of the Study**

In their study of classroom dynamics in adult literacy classrooms, Beder and Medina (in press) established that although teachers described their instruction as learner-centered, it was, nonetheless, very teacher-directed. Yet their observations indicated that teacher learner relationships, not connected to instruction, were very learner-centered. They concluded that learner-centeredness functions, not as a teaching methodology, but rather as a set of values that guides teacher-learner informal interactions. A limitation of that study, however, was that it was based solely on two observations each of 20 classrooms which provided them with just a snapshot of instruction in adult literacy classrooms. Furthermore, they did not examine the relationship between an the educational philosophy of an adult literacy program and the instruction that actually took place in the classroom. This study is designed to address those gaps. Its objective is to describe, compare and contrast teaching and learning interactions in four adult basic education (ABE) Level 1 classrooms that supposedly, as defined by program administrators, have different philosophical underpinnings that guide instruction. The research questions are: 1) What do teachers do in these four classrooms? 2) What do learners do in these four classrooms? 3) What factors may account for the similarities and differences among the four classrooms? The discussion and findings in this paper are based on data from two sites.

## **Research Design**

Using a multiple-case design. (Yin, 1984), I selected four adult literacy classrooms from four different programs as research sites. I followed the reputational case selection sampling strategy (Goetz and LeCompte 1986) whereby sites were recommended by experienced experts in the adult literacy field. I contacted program administrators and asked them to classify their instructional program based on a four-item adult literacy program practice typology developed by Purcell-Gates, Degener, and Jacobson (1998). Four programs were selected that categorized themselves as one of the following: highly collaborative, somewhat collaborative, somewhat teacher-directed, or highly teacher-directed. This classification procedure ensured that there were four distinct types of classrooms for comparison. My research stance was one of observer as participant rather than participant as observer (Merriam, 1998). Data was collected over a period of six months via fieldnotes based on classroom observation, interviews of teachers, learners and administrators, and document and artifact analysis.

## **Research Sites**

Workforce Investment Now (WIN) is part of a county public school system. The major effort of WIN is its trade and industry component. Courses such as automotive industry

preparation, computer training, electrical and energy technology and emergency medical services are offered. WIN also provides customized training to numerous corporations. A much smaller part of WIN is the Career and Life Counseling Program. ABE is part of this component. A program brochure describes ABE as a class "for adults who need to improve basic reading, writing, and math skills to progress toward GED preparation." WIN is located in a modern office building that also houses several social service agencies. The class I observed was the ABE 1 class that met two nights a week for three hours. The teacher is Kate; the administrator is Olivia.

Community Adult Program (CAP) is part of Looking Upwards, a Christian ministry affiliated community based organization (CBO). Zachariades (1988) defines a CBO as an organization that provides education and social services "linked to the culture and traditions of their communities" (ii). Looking Upwards administers a single room occupancy and a young women's shelter, an HIV and substance abuse counseling center, scattered site housing for people living with HIV and AIDS, and an education and career center. CAP is the youth and adult educational and career center of Looking Upwards. It is located next to a firehouse. It is a rather shabby building with two floors and a basement. The basement is also used as a classroom and is windowless. All classrooms are tiny, except for one that is in a common area that people walk through to get to other rooms. The ABE 1 class that I observed met three afternoons per week for four hours. The teacher is Sadie; the administrator is Jasmine.

### **Findings**

#### *It's Not How You Teach Writing, It's Why You Teach Writing*

As other studies have shown (Beder and Medina, in press; Collins, 1992; Gadsden, 1988; Koen, 1986; Mezirow, Darkenwald, Knox, 1975), adult basic education classes are discrete-skill endeavors. This study is confirming those conclusions. Both teachers have an over dependency on commercially published materials that separate reading into discrete items such as comprehension skills, author's purpose, and critical thinking skills. Yet, learners are producing very distinct types of written products. At WIN all written work was connected to mundane workbook topics such as shopping at the supermarket and buying a car. At CAP learners wrote personal stories "to describe their and examine personal identities. They wrote to tell their children what their lives had been like, to remember the good and the bad time, and to make sense of them in light of new understandings" (Gillespie, 1991, p. 184). What accounts for the difference in the way the students from the two classes express themselves through writing? It is not the manner in which the instructors teach writing. A close analysis of the data of teachers responding to the writings of learners indicates that they focus on mechanics first (errors) before they address content. For example, after Kate has corrected a learner's paper with a red pen, she writes on his paper, "Next time skip a line. Leave me a space between lines for corrections. Recopy this carefully with corrections. Could you write more?" What Sadie does is, in essence, very similar.

Sadie is looking over Mikaela's shoulder. She says, 'Tell me what you're writing about.' Before Mikaela can answer, Sadie says, 'Put a capital letter there. Where are your periods? Where are your commas? How is anyone supposed to understand that?' Only after some of the mechanics were worked out, did Mikaela and Sadie discuss the content, which was about her mother being diagnosed with cervical cancer.

Yet, the teachers have contrasting beliefs regarding the purpose of writing in the classroom. Kate believes that it is her responsibility to help students pass the GED, and the only way to accomplish that is by writing what one is told to write.

You don't have to be inspired, it doesn't have to come and not come. That's why I have a young man who likes to write, but he only wants to write about something that he wants to write about. I was telling him today, 'You can't go to the GED, not be inspired, because you're going to fail.' He wants to write about immigration and whether there should be limits on immigration. He went on to say how people don't care much about this issue. And I told him to focus, that immigration was not the topic I had given him.

Sadie views the purpose of writing very differently.

Writing has to be something that is personal to them. I allow them to choose. I never give them topics. I say, 'Write about whatever you want to write about.' And they write about something that means something to them. And it's always something that others would like to read... You can put yourself in writing. When you put yourself in writing, it brings out your character and your feelings and everything. It is important that they express themselves, so others can feel what they feel.

#### *Revelatory Voice and Restricted Voice*

What effect do these two ways of viewing the purpose of writing have in class? At CAP, they enable a revelatory learner voice to emerge and evolve. At WIN, a restricted, school-only voice is solely allowed to emerge. The literature on adult literacy addresses the power that authentic writing has in helping people to attain perspective transformation (Gillespie, 1991; Reumann, 1995). Revelatory learner voice was discernible in more ways than just through writing. It is important to operationalize the terms restricted voice and revelatory voice. Restricted learner voice is when one adopts a school-only way of being that is not connected to the rest of your life. That is the sole type of voice allowed at WIN. Revelatory voice is when learners allow their authentic selves to be revealed in the classroom. Learners integrate what they are learning in school and incorporate those elements into their real lives as parents, workers, spouses, friends, lovers, and the numerous other adult roles that learners embody. However, it is a dialectical relationship. Those adult roles are endemic to how they interact in the classroom. This is the type of literacy instruction being advocated by the National Institute for Literacy via its initiative, Equipped for the Future (Stein, 2000).

At CAP revelatory learner voice was manifested, in addition to very personal writing, in numerous ways. Learners were not afraid to confront the teacher. For example, Sadie would often chastise the Chinese learners for using electronic dictionaries. One day an elderly Chinese man tried to tell Sadie that that he needed the dictionary—that it really helped him. Sadie cut him off, "I don't care what you say. I don't want those in my classroom." Xai, a young Chinese woman, declared to Sadie that they knew what was good for them, that Sadie did not have the right to tell them not to use the dictionaries. She continued, "Mr Chu should be treated with respect. He is like a grandfather."

When I asked learners about this incident, All felt that Xai was right and that the teacher overreacted to the use of the dictionaries. Several of them confided that Sadie often treats them like children and that they will confront her if she continued to do so. What was especially

enlightening is that the learners from CAP were willing to share this type of information with during interviews. When I interviewed learners from WIN, many of them were reluctant to discuss their program let alone critique it. They constantly censored themselves, in essence, restricting their voices.

### *The Role of the Administrator*

What accounts for the differences in the evolvment of learner voice in these two adult literacy programs? At first, the answer may seem that one organization is a CBO and the other is a public school. According to Sissel (1996), a community-based approach to literacy implies that a learner's gender, ethnicity, and cultural and educational background, in conjunction with the learning environment, all affect why and how reading and writing is taught. Furthermore, Sticht (1999) claims that adult literacy educators working in different organization or institutional contexts work with different orienting mindsets about their literacy education activities. Hence, it is logical that learner voice would manifest itself differently in the two settings. As I continue to collect data, however, I am seeing revelatory voices evolve in a traditional setting—a library-based program. What is becoming most salient is the role of the administrator. I provide the following examples to illustrate how the two administrators view their roles.

It is the first evening of instruction at WIN. Kate passes out a sheet of paper. She says it has been written by the administrator of the program. She reads down the list of rules which include, no eating in the classroom, no cursing, no lateness, and no wearing hats in the classroom.

Jasmine, the administrator from CAP, describes what she does during the first class sessions.

I go into each classroom and introduce myself. I am very accessible to them. It doesn't mean much to some of them, but they know where I am and then can come and talk to me...if they do have problems in the classroom, they feel very comfortable to come talk to me, or even if they have problem in life they can come talk to me.

This initial encounter sets the tone for what is to come for the learners. It is not that Olivia, the administrator of WIN, has disrespect for the learners. She does not view her role as one that needs to interact with the learners—that is the role of the teacher. For Jasmine, interacting with learners is an essential element of her job. I collected data in both programs regularly over a period of six months. I solely collected data at CAP during classroom lessons and at one end-of year-celebration. There was nothing else to observe. No “extracurricular” activities were planned. At CAP, I observed learners not only during their scheduled literacy classes, but also participating in a family quilt sewing project, a health-team to spread awareness in the community about AIDS and breast and cervical cancer, a multi-cultural reading day presentation, a poetry café evening, as well as numerous parties and baby/bridal showers.

It is my contention that Sadie, the teacher from CAP, would not have set a tone in her class that would have allowed learners to evolve their revelatory voices. Given the data, it is clear that her inclination is to teach in a very traditional, discrete-skill-building-manner. Her proclivities are tempered by the programming decisions of Jasmine which are infused into the classroom. For example, Jasmine ensured that instructors taught in a thematic manner by

implementing a school-wide breast cancer curriculum into each of the classrooms. Sadie was mandated to steer away from her phonics work sheets, and to teach thematically which led to powerful writing by the learners. Jasmine asked a poet to teach a poetry lesson in Sadie's class to begin preparing the learners for the poetry café, and, in actuality, modeling for the teacher how to teach poetry.

### Conclusion

The literature indicates that teachers and learners overwhelmingly define literacy as a set of finite skills (Beder and Medina, in press; Collins, 1992; Dirkx and Spurgin, 1992; Lytle and Wolf, 1989). Collins (1992) specifically asked teachers how they defined literacy and found that "each teacher had a different discrete skill they recognized as fundamental to literacy education" (p. 67). Yet, adult literacy researchers who work in the realm of adult literacy programs (Auerbach, 1993; Fingeret, 1992a, b; Fingeret and Drennon, 1997; Merrifield, 1998; Parker, 1995; Pruyn, 1996, Purcell-Gates, 1995, 2000; Purcell-Gates and Waterman, 2000) consistently recommend an expanded view of literacy. Although she never stated it explicitly, the programming decisions that Jasmine makes ensures that learners and teachers expand their definitions of literacy and schooling.

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