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# How Teachers' Roles Shape Adult Literacy Learners' Engagement in Instruction

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Keywords: Adult literacy, engagement

**Abstract:** This paper addresses the question: What are the contextual factors that shape learners' engagement in adult literacy education? Six adult literacy classes were studied at an urban adult learning center. Data sources included video, traditional ethnographic observation, stimulated recall interviews and open interviews. Findings focus on the ways that teachers' roles shape engagement.

This study addresses the question: What are the contextual factors that shape learners' engagement in adult literacy education? Engagement is mental effort focused on instructional tasks, or in more simple terms, working hard at learning. When learners are engaged they are focused on their work. Their eyes are moving, pages are turning and they are writing the answers to written exercises. When they are not engaged, they are talking about things irrelevant to the class, taking breaks, or simply day dreaming. Engagement is important to an understanding of adult learning because no one can learn unless they first engage. While there is a substantial literature on engagement in K-12 education, the present study is the first we were able to identify in adult education.

## Literature

The literature on engagement can be classified into two traditions. In the first tradition, engagement is studied as a cognitive function closely associated with other cognitive constructs such as motivation and self-efficacy. Within this tradition, engagement is often termed "cognitive engagement." In the second tradition, the relationship between engagement and the instructional context is stressed.

### *Cognitive Engagement*

One of the first studies to focus on engagement as a cognitive function (Corno & Mandinach, 1983) forefronts self-regulation: "...an effort to deepen and manipulate the associative network in a particular area...and to monitor and improve that deepening process" (p. 95). For self-regulated learners, engagement operates at the meta-cognitive level. As they engage, learners think about how they are learning and are therefore able to develop strategies that are optimally effective for them within a given learning context. Corno and Mandinach postulate three other types of cognitive engagement that fall short of self-regulation. Resource management is a form of engagement in which learners rely primarily, or exclusively, on information from external resources to complete learning tasks. In recipience teachers supply learners with the information and strategies to complete learning tasks, thus removing any need on the part of the learner to make strategic learning decisions. In task-focus learners focus on a particular task, such as taking a test, without reaching beyond the parameters of the task to consider other strategic options. Although self-regulated learners may use resource management, recipience and task-focus at times, they are able to move productively between them when appropriate.

Drawing in part on Corno and Mandinach, Meece, Blumenthal, and Hoyle (1988), examine the relationship between student goal orientations and engagement. Goal orientations are classified as task-mastery, ego/social and work avoidance. In task mastery, students seek to master and understand their work. In ego/social the student's goal is to please the teacher and students with work avoidant goals attempt to do as little as possible. Meece et. al. found that task mastery was more closely associate with active cognitive engagement than the other two types of goals.

Like Corno and Mandinach, Pintrich (1990) was primarily concerned with self-regulation which he identified as having three components. The first is the student's strategies for planning, monitoring and modifying cognition. The second is the student's monitoring of the environment and the third is the use of learning strategies. Pintrich found positive relationships between motivation and self-regulation and that self- regulation had a positive affect on student performance.

#### *Engagement and Context*

Because space limitations preclude an exhaustive treatment of the cognitive engagement literature, the above studies are but examples of the cognitive tradition. While studies within this tradition present intriguing possibilities for adult education (the concept of self regulation, for example, might be a productively applied to non-formal adult learning), nearly all the literature on cognitive engagement focuses on K-12 schooling. Because the context of adult literacy differs so substantially from K-12, we were reluctant to frame the present study on the cognitively-oriented literature. Rather, we decided upon a two-step strategy. The first step, represented by this study, employed a holistic qualitative approach in an effort to capture the relationships between engagement and the broad adult literacy context. Then, once those relationships had been established, the next step was to focus more narrowly on the cognitive aspects of engagement in a series of quantitative studies. The quantitative studies are in progress.

There are a number of studies that, like the study we present here, focus on the relationship of context to engagement. As with the cognitive tradition, most relate to public school schooling. Zimmerman (1994) for example notes that the instructional context must present options for students to choose how they will learn if they are to apply self-regulated learning strategies. Newmann (Newmann, 1981; Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992) focuses on the relationship between the school's organizational context and student alienation, and in turn, on the relationship of alienation to engagement. Anderson and Lee (1997) investigated the relationships between students' motivation, engagement and the school as a social system, particularly in relationship to organizational culture, race and class. Skinner and Belmont (1993) focus on motivation, engagement and the relationship to teacher behavior.

#### **Methods**

The question that guided the research was, "what are the factors that shape engagement in an adult education setting?" The research was a qualitative study using grounded theory methodology. Over a three year period, it was conducted in six classes at an operational adult literacy learning center serving about 3,800 learners per year. Three classes were at the basic literacy level (approximate grade level 1-6) and three were secondary level courses. Data sources included video taped observation, traditional ethnographic observation, stimulated recall interviews and open interviews.

Video taped observation was the primary data source. Video proved to be very valuable because it could be viewed over and over again to refine and verify analysis. However, early on we discovered that the camera angle was too narrow to encompass the entire classroom and thus “off camera” data were being lost. Hence we added traditional ethnographic observation to the protocol to ensure a more complete set of observational data. In stimulated recall interviews, one of the five-member research team viewed the video for episodes suggestive of emerging themes. Then the learner was interviewed by the researcher while the learner viewed the episode in which he or she was the actor. In this way, what learners were thinking and feeling was added to the video record. As data collection and analysis proceeded, the five-member research team began to ask questions of the data that only learners could answer adequately. As a result, open ended, probing learner interviews were added. Teachers of the classes studied participated in data analysis and their observations were treated as data.

In data analysis, a member of the team viewed a video and noted episodes that might suggest emerging themes or revisions of previously identified themes. Then the whole team viewed the selected video segments and commented on them. The results of the session were then written into a theoretical memo that was circulated to all team members who commented on the analysis in writing, sometimes elaborating, sometimes disagreeing and sometimes adding new insights. Having multiple data sources allowed for triangulation in analysis. Finally, based on the data and memos, cases were written for each class and a thematic analysis was performed. As a member check, the teachers of the classes we observed read the final report and commented. No substantial inaccuracies were noted.

### **Findings**

We found that there were three primary factors that shaped engagement in the classes we studied: the instructional system, behavioral norms and teachers’ roles. Because of space limitations, this paper will focus on two of the six classes and on one shaping factor, teachers’ roles.

*Meghan’s class.* Prior to working in adult literacy, Meghan had been an elementary special education teacher. Because she came to the class with no experience in either adult education or the individualized teaching-learning system used by the previous teacher, she could not rely on prior socialization for informing teaching role behavior in the adult context. Thus, in deciding how to teach she patterned her behavior primarily on her perception of how the previous teacher had taught. The instructional system in previous use was one we have termed individualized group instruction (IGI). In IGI, which was employed for most of the reading, writing and math instruction at the Center, learner’s skills levels were diagnosed through testing. Learners were then assigned to a class where they were given paper and pencil materials by the teacher that were geared to their skill levels. Learners then worked individually on the materials and were assisted by the teacher when necessary. Although diagnosis, prescription, assessment and assistance were part of the IGI rubric wherever it was used, there were also variations in the way teachers employed IGI.

We have termed Meghan’s variation of IGI, “correct and direct.” Meghan’s “teaching” included three steps, correct, direct, praise. Meghan would first assign students individualized reading or math materials based on their diagnosed skill level. Then students would work individually on the materials and would signal Meghan or Connie, the aide, when they had completed an exercise. The materials would then be corrected, generally with an answer key. If the exercise was essentially correct, the student would be directed to work on more difficult

material. If the exercise was incorrect, materials at the same level would be assigned, and in some cases, Meghan would instruct the student one-on-one. In the following example, Meghan works with Peter.

Silvia and Peter together are reading Peter's answers from his worksheet. At first both read out loud together and then they go back and forth.

Both Sylvia and Peter together: In May hey. It's May hey. It's a day away.

Silvia: All right, read it again.

Both together: It's a day away. We have the hay.

Silvia: Hey. Ray had the hay.

Both together: Ray had the hay.

Silvia: Ray had the hay. Lay the hay away.

Silvia: Hey, hay, day, lay, say, nay, use any of these letters to make words. Okay? Then there's a sentence and there's three words for each sentence. Okay? You have say, day, May, now finish the sentence

Meghan's teaching sessions were almost always focused on the materials, the objective being to help the learners to get their wrong answers right. When Meghan returned corrected materials or finished a one-on-one session, as in the following example she always closed the interaction with praise.

Silvia : Okay. You just read fifteen sentences. Tadaa! You can read! You can read.

You can read. You can read! All right, we're going to start a new session. Okay? I can read. I can read. Okay? [Writes "I can read" on Rina's paper.] Okay? What's that say?

Rina: I can read.

Silvia: Say it nice.

Rina: I can read.

Silvia: I can read. Say it like you mean it. I can read. If you know the letters and you know how to speak, you can read. I can read...

Megan assumed that if learners' work was correct, they understood the lesson.

She virtually never entered into diagnostic dialogue with learners to make sure that had understood the individualized lessons.

As in all the classes we studied, the learners in Meghan's classes were almost always engaged, primarily because motivation was high. However, because Megan perceived her role to be primarily a manager of the individualized instructional system and rarely "taught" in the traditional sense, individualized materials were the objects of learners' engagement. Because instruction was individualized, learners controlled when they would engage and for how long. They also had a considerable amount of control over what instructional materials they would engage in. Both Meghan and the learners measured progress by how well learners were progressing through the materials, but were they truly comprehending? If Cora and Janice in the next class are correct, the answer was not always yes.

*Cora and Janice's class.* Shortly after we had finished collecting data in Meghan's class, Megan left to take a job in another state and Cora and Janice took over as the teachers. Cora and Janice moved to small group instruction, because after interacting with the lower level students in an individualized format, they concluded that the least proficient students were not understanding the material embodied in the exercises, even though they were often getting correct answers. The solution, they believed, was more direct teaching. Yet because of the size of the class, they lacked the capacity to provide a sufficient amount of direct teaching in the one-on-one mode characteristic of individualized instruction. Cora and Janice divided the class of

about sixteen learners into two groups. Cora took one group and Janice took the other. Students had no choice in the group they were assigned to. In explaining the reason for the move to small group instruction, Cora said:

... with working individually in a lower level class, they [the learners] require so much of your time, so much individual help that it's just impossible to deal with just every person. It's impossible. So the decision was made pretty early on, I would say within the first two weeks of just feeling around and both of us walking into a program that we had not taught previously. And, we just had to pick up the pieces of an existing program, and we decided right away, since there were two of us, we were going to start to do group instruction... We tried to make a very quick assessment of what their levels were within those two weeks, what their needs were, and to group them accordingly. And, realize that there's going to be some difference between levels at tables, but we felt an advantage to have people even groups with somebody who would be a little higher and somebody who would be very low, and somebody in the middle so they could drag each other along because we just couldn't do it otherwise.

Although Cora and Janice "taught" in the traditional sense of the term to their groups, their teaching still focused on the materials. The difference between their class and Meghan's was that the students engaged with the materials as a group guided by the teacher rather than individually. In one class, for example, Cora led the class through a materials-based exercise on traffic signs. The students were given a work sheet on which there was a series of traffic signs. First, Cora called on a student to decode the sign and generally students were able to do this without difficulty. Then she asked the student to explain what the sign meant. This was more difficult for the group and Cora would not go to the next sign until she was convinced that all the students in the group understood the meaning. Dealing with the sign "no passing," for example, took about ten minutes.

In Cora and Janice's class, students were engaged with both the materials and the teachers. Because of the role they had adopted, the teachers determined when learners would engage, how they would engage and the subject matter they would engage in. Because of the rule, "we don't go on until everyone understands", the pace of instruction was relatively slow.

### **Discussion**

According to state law, all adult literacy teachers who taught in public school sponsored adult literacy programs had to be certified as K-12 teachers. This meant that teachers in the classes we observed had been socialized into teaching roles through their own experience as elementary-secondary students, through teacher education, and in most cases through their experience as teachers in K-12 institutions. When it came to teaching adult literacy learners, however, their socialization was incomplete in at least two respects: they lacked experience teaching adults and they lacked experience with the IGI instructional system. Because the Center had no prescribed curriculum, teachers had to learn appropriate role behavior by falling back on those aspects of K-12 role behavior that seemed to be appropriate, by trial and error and to a limited extent by interacting with more experienced teachers.

In essence, teachers had to self-define their roles. This meant, that lacking a common socialization experience in respect to adult literacy, teachers' role behavior varied somewhat from class to class. The findings of this study demonstrate that how teachers define their roles is one of the factors that shaped learner engagement in instruction. In Meghan's class, the adoption of IGI meant that learners had considerable control over when they engaged and over the pace of

their engagement. The materials they were assigned determined what they engaged in and the material's directions determined how they would engage. Megan's correct and direct role behavior may have meant, however, that the product of engagement was getting the correct answer and not necessarily comprehension.

In their role behavior, Cora and Janice stressed comprehension and support over getting the correct answers and this led them to abandon IGI for small group instruction. In the small groups, however, engagement was teacher-directed and learners had little control over when they engaged, the pace of their engagement or how they engaged.

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