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Adult Learner Success Stories: The Impact of Shifting Political Discourses on Adult Literacy Education

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Abstract: This study examines the impact of shifting political discourse on adult literacy success stories. Those shaped by a liberal democratic discourse portray programs as the means students use to achieve their educational goals, while those framed within a neoconservative discourse attribute the students' success to their own efforts through a type of bootstrapism.

The American political landscape has changed dramatically in the past 30 years. The liberal democratic philosophy that drove Lyndon Johnson and gave rise to the Great Society saw government as responsible for the welfare of all its people, with particular responsibility to help those in greatest need. The neoconservative philosophy of George W. Bush, on the other hand, believes strongly in a limited role for government and expanded freedom for individual and private enterprise (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 2004).

These competing philosophies of government are played out across multiple arenas and manifest themselves in diverse public policies, including social policies related to adult literacy education. These policies include workforce development legislation, adult literacy legislation, and welfare legislation. Quigley (1997) states that during the 1960s, literacy education encouraged undereducated adults to “join a massive effort to develop a better-trained, more fully employed, more economically productive workforce” (p. 85). While literacy education was linked to *economic development*, this occurred in a social context of a supportive safety net. A shift began occurring in the 1980s, however, increasingly linking work and basic skills education. This move also shifted responsibility for workforce success away from the government and placed it firmly upon individual workers/learners. By the mid 1990s, this link was set in stone, evidenced by the *Workforce Investment Act*. An explicit goal for adult education within the act is to “assist adults in becoming literate and obtaining the knowledge and skills necessary for employment and *self-sufficiency*” (NIFL, 1998, emphasis ours). A similar shift occurred in welfare legislation affecting adult literacy programs.

Adult literacy programs, like most social programs, have always had to make a public case about their value and effectiveness, and they routinely provide statistics about their productivity in terms of educational and occupational outcomes of their students. But recognizing the persuasive power of narrative, they have built the case for the effectiveness of their programs through telling stories about students whose lives have been changed for the better because of participation in these programs. These stories have been referred to as “success stories” (Sandlin, 2004; St. Clair, 2004). Such stories, widely known throughout the field of adult literacy, are often touted as showing the “personal face” of adult literacy learners, and appear in newspapers and magazines (Quigley, 1997). As common as these stories are, no one has studied them as a genre in order to understand how they work. Because they have been used extensively in the field across

time, it is also important to understand how changing social and political contexts have shaped these stories. The purpose of this study was to examine the genre of adult literacy success stories over the past thirty years in order to understand the impact of the shifting political discourse on the stories teachers tell. We also seek to understand the consequences of this impact on adult literacy education.

Theoretical Framework

Narrative theory provides a useful framework to explore these questions. Narratives are a means of meaning making; they provide a way for the teller to create order out of experience and to render an interpretation of it. Stories always have a point—they are designed to accomplish something. Narratives must also be understood as social constructions. They are told to a particular audience and are in a real sense a co-construction of teller and listener. Furthermore, they are created within the norms and expectations of the culture of which they are a part. Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992) make the point that “culture ‘speaks itself’ through an individual’s story” (p. 7). Thus, narrative depictions, argues Gring-Pemble (2003), are *constitutive*, in the sense that they both imply an ideal audience and commit that audience to behave “in accordance with the narrative logic inherent in the depictions” (p. 10). That is, narratives embody certain ideologies and ways of acting in the world. It is possible, then, to examine how social and cultural norms are taken up by personal and popular narratives and shaped by them.

Methods & Data Sources

There are numerous examples of contemporary adult literacy learner success stories; we examined both state and national collections in order to understand these stories as a genre. To answer our broader question, however, we needed a collection spanning a larger period of time. We found such a collection in the “Success Stories” project sponsored by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. Our data set consisted of 257 stories written by teachers about their students, published between 1978 and 2005.

To analyze these stories we used Burke’s (1962) method of pentadic criticism. The elements of Burke’s pentad are most familiar to us as the six questions of journalism—who, what, when, where, why, and how—that when answered create a complete story. For Burke the who is the *agent* of the story; the what is the *act* that the agent does. How that act is accomplished is, for Burke, *agency* or *the means used* to effect the act. The where and when of the story is the *scene*; and the why is the *purpose* of the act itself. Burke’s pentad is derived from dramatism, which assumes we use language to “present a particular view of our situation, just as the presentation of a play creates a certain world or situation inhabited by characters who engage in actions in a setting. Through rhetoric, we size up situations and name their structure and outstanding ingredients. How we describe a situation indicates how we are perceiving it and the choices we see available to us” (Foss, 1989, p. 336). Typically Burke is used to determine the motive behind the telling of the story. In our case we already know the motive behind the success stories—namely to secure continued funding from the state legislature. What is of interest to us is understanding how those stories change across the period of 27 years, which will in turn help us understand the impact of dominant political discourses on the construction of those stories. We focused our attention particularly on the two 5-year periods at the ends of the time span covered by the stories—1978-1984 (there were

no booklets available for 1979 and 1980) and 2001-2005—so that we could note the extent of the change over the years.

Findings & Discussion

Four of Burke's elements remain constant across both sets of stories—agent, scene, act, and purpose; the only one that changes is agency, or the means used to achieve the act. Here we describe the first four briefly and focus on the change in agency in more detail. The *agent* is the adult student and is always portrayed as moral, hard-working, and dedicated to the welfare of others. The students portrayed represent different groups, including immigrants, single mothers, former welfare recipients, the disabled, and former drug addicts. The *scene* is their life circumstances; this is where the dramatic tension of the story is located. All endure and overcome obstacles, such as poverty, domestic violence, or chemical addiction. The *act* is the achievement of their educational goals or occupational goals. The *purpose* of the act is obtaining a better life. Typically this means employment, and for some obtaining citizenship, but it also results in increased self-esteem and enables them to actively contribute to their community.

It is in *agency*, or the means used to achieve the act, where we see a distinct change between the two groups of success stories. In the earlier stories the means of achieving success is clearly and unambiguously the program. In the prefaces to these booklets this is made explicit: the 1978 award citation states, “In recognition of achievement in reaching a more personally fulfilling life and a significant standard of service to others through dedicated participation in an adult basic education program.” In the early stories themselves the programs are very visible. Teachers and staff are frequently mentioned for their dedicated service and the encouragement and support they provide to students. The plotline of these stories includes the progress the student makes within the program. The story of Rebecca Jackson, written in 1978, illustrates this well:

Rebecca is 25, the wife of a policeman, mother of two young boys, and she came to our one-to-one literacy tutoring program after several false and discouraging starts in an ABE classroom. Rebecca was too nervous, too needful of attentive support, to survive in a classroom. Happily, her motivation to learn was strong, and she found out about one of our library learning centers. After a year or so of tutoring from a volunteer, Becky appeared one day, literally shaking with fear, in my creative writing class for new readers. She insisted she couldn't write or spell, and was extremely dependent on my encouragement. That was six months ago. This month, Becky has a hilarious, original story written from the point of view of her six-year-old in our tutor newsletter. Better still, she is soon to appear before the Psychology Club of Drexel University to help us initiate a cooperative tutoring-for-credit arrangement with the school. She will be addressing 40 college students, persuading them to tutor one adult student like herself.

Becky said to me, “I stood in front of my mirror all day Sunday wondering why my teacher picked me to do this.” Why did I? There are the obvious reasons: she is a highly persuasive, almost evangelical speaker—this talent blossomed in the writing class. She is charming and well spoken. But Becky exemplifies the fulfillment of our agency's objectives. She was an adult, reading below a fourth-grade level, for whom a classroom was too threatening. She initially leaned heavily on her volunteer tutor—they became friends—for encouragement. Since that time of dependence she has undergone a beautiful transformation. She is, as she says, “fighting” for what she deserves: the decent education she never got, a future for her children, participation in her church (previously

she was too afraid she would be asked to read or write), eventually employment and increased independence.

The timid, frail woman-child I once knew is now a fighter. Becky will leave our program long before she achieves the height of her educational life. She will go on to gain her GED, perhaps she will go further. But we gave her what she needed, when she needed it, and now she is equipped to “take it from there.” Becky has been an inspiration to me. That why I chose her to speak to the Drexel students, and that’s why I chose her for this honor.

In the later stories, however, agency changes dramatically. The programs recede into the background and sometimes disappear altogether; instead it is the adult students who do the work and who are responsible for their own success. The emphasis is placed on what they do and achieve; it is implied that they do this work largely on their own. The picture drawn in these later stories is of students achieving on their own through a type of bootstrapism. While enrolled in literacy programs, their success is the product of their own efforts. The story of Julio Navarro from 2004 is typical:

When Julio Navarro first started classes at the Chester County OIC, he had to read slowly out loud, pointing to each word. Little by little, his speed picked up, and his vocabulary and comprehension increased. After a while he was able to read silently. With extra time, Julio thought he could pass all the reading sections of the GED. Having dyslexia qualified Julio for that extra time. The staff pursued GED accommodations for Julio’s learning disability, but the required testing and paperwork threatened to delay his goal of joining the Armed Forces.

In January, Julio marched into the test center and took the entire GED with no extra time. He did not pass the GED test that day, but the language arts writing test was the only one he had to take over. For the next two months, he worked on language arts writing like an Olympic athlete would train just before the qualifying trials. He had to learn ways of dealing with his dyslexia. He developed innovative approaches to avoid chronic misspellings, and he found ways to control his sentence writing. He studied all the rules of English and wrote countless essays.

Julio wanted to write an essay that would receive a passing score of two. He could get a two by writing clearly and concisely. He also had to get a high percentage of the multiple-choice writing questions correct in order to pass the test. According to his instructor, Julio had to answer 40 out of the 50 questions correctly. To his credit, Julio worked incredibly hard in the multiple-choice content area of the test. The Center provided extra books and materials. He passed the language arts test and got a high percentage of the writing questions correct.

Julio has been a great inspiration to students and staff at Chester County OIC. He enthusiastically encourages his friends to begin their GED studies, saying “If I can get my GED, anybody can!” He recently retook the language arts writing test, passed with forty points to spare, and reached his dream of joining the United States Armed Forces.

The contrast between these two stories is striking. In Rebecca’s story from 1978 we hear the strong voice of the literacy program making the claim that it is responsible for her dramatic change from the “timid, frail woman-child” to the “fighter.” There is much in the story to support this claim. Becky first tried an ABE classroom program but she needed more support than could be provided in a group context, so she turned to the one-on-one tutoring program and worked with a volunteer for more than a year. Even

when she was ready to try a classroom setting again, she couldn't succeed without significant support from the teacher, and the fact that she is a much more capable student after only six months suggests that the teacher did in fact give her a great deal of support and encouragement. We know of her success in terms of what she has accomplished in and for the program: publication of a story in the tutor newsletter, and being asked to speak at the local university to help the literacy program begin a new initiative there. She is an active agent here, but the context for her action is the program itself. The teacher goes on to say that Becky "exemplifies the fulfillment of our agency's objectives" and it is clear that those objectives are to move students from dependence to independence. The function of the program is to give students what they need, when they need it, and that will enable them to be successful. And we see the program's success in Becky.

Julio's story from 2004 is very different, even though like Becky's it is a success story. Here the teacher attributes success to the student rather than to the program, and in fact the program stays very much in the background. The story begins with Julio starting his classes and slowly making progress in his reading, but no one is given credit for his improvement—it is almost as if the teachers are not there. The first mention of the program staff is their effort to obtain accommodations for him in taking the GED exam because of his learning disability. Significantly, though, Julio refuses the accommodation because it might delay his enlistment in the military. Instead he takes the GED without assistance and passes all but one of the tests. Particularly striking is the language the teacher uses to describe Julio's preparation for retaking the language arts test. He is likened to an Olympic athlete in training, and all the action is located within himself: *he* figured out how to deal with his dyslexia, *he* developed strategies to improve his spelling, *he* "found ways" to construct proper sentences, and *he* learned to master the rules of English grammar. The way this is written suggests that he accomplished all this without any assistance from his teachers. The only thing the program does is provide "extra books and materials"; there is no mention of any instruction. Even the inspiration Julio brings to other students is focused solely on his own efforts: "If I can get my GED, anybody can!"

When we consider the other Burkian elements in these stories, though, we see no differences. Both students are depicted as agents who are admirable and hard-working. Their life circumstances, the scene, involve hardships that they overcome. Rebecca triumphs over her low self-esteem and neediness; Julio wins out over his learning disability. Both act, achieving their educational goals. Julio obtains his GED, and while Becky has yet to achieve that goal, she now has the strength to do so and her teacher is confident that she will go even further educationally. As for the purpose, attaining a better life, both accomplish that. Julio enlisted in the Armed Forces, and Becky's personal transformation has gained her the promise of independence. What sets the two stories apart is the means used to achieve the act. In Becky's case the literacy program is instrumental, whereas Julio's success is his own and the program is virtually invisible.

It is revealing to examine these narratives of success stories in terms of McLaren's (1995) discussion of the socializing function of narrative. McLaren (1995) argues that narratives "introduce individuals or groups into a particular way of life through their authorial voice and legitimating functions. Theories, ideologies, and social and institutional practices—and our relationship to them—are all informed by narratives" (McLaren, 1995, p. 91). The shift over time in agency is thus a direct reflection of the shift over time in political discourse. In the earlier stories the programs are the means,

which is congruent with the liberal democratic political discourse valuing the role of government. In the later stories we see reflected the neoconservative political discourse that places responsibility on individuals, not on government; thus the means used to achieve educational attainment is individual effort. What is critical here is that this latter discourse results in the construction of a story which now undermines the motive of the telling, namely securing government funding for the literacy programs.

The narratives promoted in the success stories, then, serve the ideological purpose of selecting for us one way of looking at the world, while hiding or distracting us from other possible ways of viewing the world. While earlier narratives promoted a worldview embracing the responsibility of social services to help those who were considered “less fortunate,” more recent narratives promote a conservative agenda that “scorns the ideal of collective empowerment and social responsibility in the name of economic realism” (McLaren, 1995, p. 103). Educational narratives within this age of conservatism uphold a “master narrative” constructed by the New Right which highlights “who its ideal subjects were, and *how they personify the sacred values of religion, hard work, health, and self-reliance*” (Denzin, 1991, p. 150, emphasis ours). The ideology of self-reliance found in these more recent narratives is linked to domination and unequal power relations because it legitimates the current social system which is increasingly dismantling a social safety net, and reifies our current system, instead of illuminating how it was historically produced.

Significance

Quigley (1997) argues educators enter the field of adult literacy education because they have a deep sense of caring about learners. Quigley suggests, however, that in order to operate in the best interest of learners, and to create a more stable infrastructure for the field, adult literacy educators need to pay close attention to how the field is perceived in society and how we shape that perception. Through this research we hope to contribute to a more thorough understanding of how dominant discourses impact the field of adult literacy education. We have shown how adult literacy educators have, in the stories they tell, embraced dominant political ideologies and are currently telling stories focused increasingly on self-sufficiency and the ability of adult literacy learners to “lift themselves up by the bootstraps.” While the narratives of the early stories were problematic because they embraced what Quigley (1997) calls the “soft popular perspective,” the new ideological narrative is an equal or even greater cause for concern because it works to undermine the practice of adult education itself. The challenge to us as a field, as we see it, is not only to understand how the dominant discourse speaks itself through us but more importantly, to find ways to subvert it by putting ourselves back into our own narratives of educational practice, thus preserving and serving the interests of adult education. It is a challenge we ignore at our peril.

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