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# **The Dynamics of Adult Basic Education Instruction**

Hal Beder  
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**Abstract: This presentation reports the results of a classroom dynamics study of adult literacy education in which twenty adult literacy classes were observed twice in seven states. For each observed class, teachers were interviewed. Students were interviewed when possible. The overriding theme was classroom culture, defined as the socially patterned human thought and behavior that takes place in adult literacy education classrooms.**

## **Introduction**

In the United States, the federally-funded adult basic education program is the primary mechanism for serving the approximately 40 to 44 million adults (Kirsch et. al., 1993) who are in need of basic literacy education. Although from the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) (Kirsch et. al, 1993) and the National Evaluation of the Adult Education Program (NEAEP) (Young, et. al, 1994) we know a great deal about adult literacy education programs and their learners, we know very little about what happens in adult literacy education classrooms. Indeed, a literature search uncovered but two studies of classroom dynamics. One was a small-scale study (Collins, 1992). The other was a large-scale, comprehensive study of classroom dynamics (Mezirow, Darkenwald & Knox, 1975) but that study is over twenty years old.

## **Methods**

The present study is a descriptive analysis of the classroom dynamics of twenty adult literacy education classrooms. Research sites were selected to maximize program and learner diversity, and to that end, classes were selected to represent each of 18 characteristics which previous research had shown to be "shaping variables" of adult literacy instruction [e.g. geographic location, program type, urban/suburban/rural, instructional level of the class etc.]. Classes were selected in seven states. For each class, data were collected on four occasions. First the class was observed by a trained observer. Then the teacher was interviewed. A second observation followed and finally students were interviewed when possible. The teacher interview was open-ended and was focused on the first observation in order to gather data about the teacher's intentions for and perceptions of the class observed. The interview also gave the observer an opportunity to discuss with the teacher any episodes in the observation that needed clarification in respect to their meaning or purpose. After each data collection, detailed and comprehensive field notes were completed. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Data were analyzed using a grounded theory methodology. First, after thoroughly studying the over seventy sets of field notes which were 15 to 20 pages in length, a preliminary set of thematic categories was identified by the researchers. These categories were primarily descriptive of classroom dynamics and interactions. Then the field notes were entered into the

NUDIST computer program for qualitative analysis. Starting with the preliminary categories, three researchers then coded the data and in the process identified new themes and refined and elaborated the initial themes. Periodically the coding of the three analysts was merged using the QSR Merge Computer Program and categories were collapsed, renamed, and expanded as

necessary. To further refine the analysis, word searches were conducted and the results coded and analyzed.

The NUDIST analysis was essentially a "bottom-up" approach to data analysis which had the advantage of being very systematic and of allowing us to retain virtually every data segment in the analysis pool. There was a disadvantage, however: Because data were collected by over five data collectors, the researchers conducting the analysis were not familiar with the overriding context of the classes except for what they read in the field notes. Consequently, when data segments were dis-embedded from the over 1000 pages of field notes in NUDIST coding, the holistic sense of context was lost.

To rectify this problem, a form of cross-case analysis was also conducted. First we read the field notes over and over until they had almost memorized them. Then, based on the sense of global context gained, the classes were categorized into a three-part typology based on classroom interaction. Group one included highly individualized classes where learners tended to work on their own on teacher-selected materials. Group two represented classes where there was a mix of individualized and small group work. In group three there was considerable teacher-student and student-student interaction and the social distance between the teacher and students was minimal. When both the NUDIST and cross case analyses were complete, the results of both were synthesized.

### **Findings**

Space limitations preclude a detailed account of findings, a problem that will be rectified to some extent in the presentation. Consequently, we have chosen to portray the overriding theme that emerged from the study. This theme we call classroom culture. Following Tylor (as quoted in Bodley, 1994), classroom culture is defined as the socially patterned human thought and behavior that takes place in adult literacy education classrooms. It includes:

1. shared meanings about: teacher/learner roles, symbols and classroom activities. The extent to which meanings are shared varied between classes and among subgroups within classes.
2. norms regarding acceptable teacher and learner behavior. Norms were viewed from the perspective of what they were, how they were established, and how they were applied (positive and sanctioning).
3. relationships of power and authority (i.e. who gets who to do what and how).
5. A material culture defined by such things as classroom organization and materials used.

Classroom culture is holistic; all its components are inter-related. Classroom culture is shaped by external forces such as teachers' perspectives and characteristics, program configuration and students' perceptions and characteristics. Just as classroom culture is shaped by external forces, it in turn shapes what is taught, what is learned and how. Classroom culture is dynamic and constantly changing.

Authority and control. Classroom culture is greatly influenced by the teacher. In virtually all the classes we studied the teacher selected the content and guided the process of formal instruction. In some cases learners were given limited choice, such as in the selection of one activity over another, but these choices were almost universally at teachers' discretion. To be sure teachers tried to make content relevant to learners. Yet while relevance was something that concerned almost all teachers, decisions of relevance were by an large based on teachers' perceptions of what was relevant. In one class where most students were foreign born, the teacher selected immigration as the class theme and reading and writing activities revolved around this theme. In another multi-ethnic class ,the teacher directed learners to write about major cultural celebrations in their countries of origin. Many teachers used commercially prepared materials which were chosen at least partially for their perceived relevance. In several GED prep classes, teachers developed lessons that focused on GED test content. Teachers also controlled time and space. They determined when class would begin and end, furniture arrangements, and how long classroom activities would last.

Learners almost universally accepted the preeminence of the teachers' role as being legitimate. When teachers directed an activity, there was nearly universal compliance, sometimes after some good natured grumbling over less popular activities. Sometimes learners "tuned out" for periods. Although it would have been tempting to consider this as evidence of passive resistance, most learners who tuned out actively re-engaged shortly after a tuning out episode.

We infer that the preeminence of the teacher's role is the product of deep-seated cultural norms regarding teacher's and students' roles. Learners expect teachers to guide instruction and teachers believe it is their responsibility to do so. These mutual expectations result in a teacher-predominate classroom culture. An exception was a class taught by a teacher with a Freirian perspective. In this class, the social distance between the teacher and students was less than in any other we observed and the teacher often engaged in discussions as an active participant rather than as a facilitator or guide. Yet when we interviewed the teacher, it became clear that the class functioned as it did by her design rather than through her acquiescence to the learners. In one of this teacher's classes we observed there had been several heated thematic discussions. As another dialogic discussion was about to take place, learners asked the teacher to curtail the dialogic process, suggesting that they wished the teacher to function in the more traditional teacher-directed role.

Classroom Norms. Norms regarding learner behavior differed substantially from what one might expect in an elementary or secondary education classroom. In most classes there were learners who arrived up to 45 minutes late. They were rarely sanctioned negatively and usually fit into class with minimal acknowledgement or class disruption. In many classes there were students who tuned out for periods by leaving class for self-determined breaks, by staring out into space, by putting their heads down on the desk or table, by engaging in personal conversations not

related to class and even by sleeping. This behavior was seldom sanctioned negatively by the teacher or other students. As mentioned earlier, after a tune out episode, learners usually re-engaged. Teachers tended to attribute tuning out to learner fatigue, although observers comments suggested that boredom was sometimes a factor. Learners usually chose where they would sit and cliques based on age, gender or ethnicity were evident in most seating selections.

The most common pattern of teachers' instructional behavior was an activity followed by questioning and answering. The teacher, for example, would ask learners to read and would then ask questions to determine if they had comprehended. Similar patterns were common for writing, math and GED subjects. Except when learners were directed to work in small groups or pairs, dialog between the teacher and individual students predominated. The teacher would ask a question, an individual student would respond--either voluntarily or by being called upon--and a new question would be posed. Typically questions were designed to elicit a factual response rather than students' opinions. Rarely did a question and answer episode open into to a collective discussion where students interacted with each other as well as with the teacher.

Norms regarding helping and correcting varied among classes. In an extreme case, a class that was highly individualized, the teacher believed that only she should correct and help. She moved from student to student, usually in the order that students arrived, correcting their individualized work and delivering a mini-lesson based on their errors. Each of these sessions lasted about 20 minutes, and learners who had completed their work had to wait for the teacher's attention before they were permitted to move on. In the majority of classes learners corrected and helped each other. In many cases teachers directed learners to work in pairs or small groups where they corrected each others' work and helped each other. This was most common in math, in which case learners worked on math problems together, and in writing where learners edited each others work. In some classes students helping students was very common and natural. A student would write a sentence on the board, for example, and another student would correct it before the teacher had the opportunity or a learner would ask another learner for help on a math problem because the teacher was busy elsewhere.

In nearly every case, teachers indicated that they were striving to create a nurturing, trusting classroom atmosphere and this was evident in observation. Teachers verbally rewarded learners when they were correct and virtually never took a punishing stance when learners made mistakes. Teachers attempted to reduce the social distance between themselves and learners through humor and by brief personal accounts of their likes and dislikes and personal out-of-class activities. In classrooms that were used exclusively for adult education, there was typically a bulletin board with student work displayed and other adult symbols. In such classrooms, students usually sat at tables or u-shaped arrangements rather than in rows.

Shaping factors. Just as classroom culture shapes what and how learners learn, classroom culture is in turn is shaped by factors external to the classroom. The most powerful shaping factor is program configuration, defined as how the program is organized in respect to such factors and the number of hours per week classes meet, open or closed enrollment, and mixed or homogeneous learner skill levels. Hours of instruction per week varied from six to over 30. In some cases learners who were essentially illiterate were assigned to the same class as learners who were ready to pass the GED, while in others learners were at approximately at the same skill

level. In open enrollment classes, students could enroll at any time and there was a constant flow of new learners, while in closed enrollment classes learners entered as a cohort and remained a cohort.

Together, these three components of program configuration influenced the ability of the class to function as an effective social system. When classes met only several hours a week, it was more difficult for shared meanings to develop regarding the purpose of activities and for rapport to develop between teachers and students and among students. More importantly, when the same learners were not present each week due to attrition and open-enrollment, learners were less able to learn classroom routine and the meanings associated with classroom exercises and social interactions. Comparing stable classes that met 20 or more hours a week or more and had stable enrollments to less stable classes, in stable classes teachers seemed to attempt activities that were more complex and to conduct them more successfully. Learners were adept at helping each

other and there was a smoother transition from activity to activity. More importantly, much more was accomplished in a given hour of instruction.

Mixed enrollment caused problems for teachers, especially if the range in skill level were substantial. Faced with this situation, teachers had three choices. They could teach to the entire class, in which case the activities were either too difficult or too easy for some learners. Some tuning out behavior was due to the boredom and/or frustration this sometimes caused for learners. Alternatively, they could use highly individualized instruction in which learners worked on their own with materials selected at their skill level. These materials were usually kept in portfolios or folders. Although learners worked at an appropriate skill level in such classes, there was minimal social interaction among learners and few thematic discussions. Finally, teachers could group learners according to level, have them work individually or collaboratively on activities, and rotate from group to group to help and correct. This alternative was only possible when there a sufficient number of learners to establish groups and it presented difficult classroom arrangement problems for teachers. Some teachers adopted an eclectic approach in which learners worked individually part of the time but were taught as a group when the material warranted.

Major changes in enrollment, student flow, and skill levels reeked havoc in two of the 20 sites. One class was a family literacy class originally comprised of welfare mothers whose children were in the early childhood component. Welfare reform had decimated the population of welfare learners, and to maintain class numbers, community members were invited to enroll. Previously, the commonality associated with gender and parenthood, and well as participation in child-parent activities, had caused the class to bond, but when the commonality disappeared, the class ceased to function well as a social system and the teacher never adapted. In a GED preparation class, a small class of learners who paid a fee to enroll was changed the next semester to a large open-enrollment, mixed level class into which the small class was merged. Although the teacher was reluctant to short-change her the original group of learners by starting at the beginning, she was faced with many new students with low skills. At the time of the second observation, the teacher used the same activities that had previously worked successfully with the small class, but these activities were now either too difficult or misunderstood by many new learners. The teacher, who

sensed this from new learners' non-responses to her questioning and answering, became exasperated and responded with sarcasm directed towards learners.

Student characteristics such as age, ethnicity and gender were another shaping factor. In regard to age, in two classes there were a number of teenage dropouts who disrupted the class with joking behavior and loud personal conversations. In two classes of mixed racial composition there were mild inter-racial confrontations. In another class of primarily foreign-born, activities failed because the learners did not understand the teacher's directions. On the positive side, in a class of female welfare recipients, learners were able to discuss gender issues a personal level, something that probably would have been impossible had men been present, and a class of mixed ethnicity used immigration as a unifying theme for reading and writing.

Conclusions and implications. When learners and teachers share meanings regarding classroom activities and the goals of instruction, and when classes are stable in respect to enrollment so that these shared meanings can develop, adult literacy education classes function as an effective social system directed toward learning. This finding suggests that policy makers should consider classroom stability to be a major factor contributing to instructional success. Open enrollment, classes that meet but several hours a week and mixed enrollments are practices that should be discouraged.

Although teachers strive to create a trustful, non-threatening learning environment, and to make the content of instruction relevant to learners, they control the process and content of instruction. The centrality of the teacher suggests that teacher competence is critical for instructional success. Accordingly, staff development should be expanded in both quantity and quality and access to it should be improved.

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