

**CHAPTER NINE**

**Towards Meaning-Centered Considerations of Policy and Practice:  
Summary and Implications**



### SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Over the course of the past three decades, psychologists have generated, elaborated, and applied the insights brought about by explorations of the development of mind to the larger question of how adults can be helped further their development in positive, life-enhancing ways. The introduction of developmental perspectives has enlivened conversations about how adults know, grow, and become more capable of managing the ever-emergent complexities of adult life. These perspectives rest on the basic assumption that there is a trajectory of desirable growth of mind that can be described and measured in ways respecting individual differences while highlighting continuities of experience. In this monograph, we have consistently applied developmental psychological perspectives to the experiences of adults learning in ABE/ESOL settings. We believe, based on our findings, that our application of this perspective sheds light on rich ongoing debates in adult basic education and informs an understanding of learner experience and teacher practice in ABE/ESOL settings.

What is equally compelling to us as psychologists and educators is the impact our study has had on the ways in which we conceptualize adults developing. Because prior research on adult development focused largely on white, middle-class, college-educated adults, we respectfully wondered how helpful our framework would be in understanding a more diverse group of learners' experiences. In essence, what we discovered is that our framework itself developed in response to and in relationship with our data. In the Introduction, we presented the construct of "cultures of mind." In concluding, we will dwell a little longer on how we have come to understand the role and nature of consciousness development for the adult learners who participated in our study.

At the heart of our exploration and analysis has been what we have called the pursuit of understanding participants' "meaning-making." We see the active, ongoing, systematic interpretation of experience as the motion of development. By this we mean we attended to how participants thought, felt, and talked with us about their programs because their understandings more than their observed behaviors suggest how well and fully they are making use of their educational experiences to further their own purposes. In our framework, the shape of meaning-making is regulated by a person's level of development, and therefore a familiarity with developmental principles can bring us closer to an empathic understanding of personal experience. But meaning-making carries a broader connotation as well. It also signifies the shared understandings that people from a common region, background, or network of values express together. In this study, we came to an understanding about the rich interplay between personal meaning systems and shared

meaning systems. We especially came to an appreciation of the delicate and brave reshaping of personal meaning systems adult learners must take on when moving into a new culture with a new set of shared meanings, thus provoking a set of challenges to their existing view of themselves (their identity) and to the performance of their roles (as parents, workers, and learners). We did not embark on a study of acculturation in the typical sense of the term. Yet we found ourselves engaged in a persistent exploration of how individual and collective meaning systems must come into some form of workable balance if adults are to find their lives engaging rather than overwhelming, potentially uplifting rather than persistently demoralizing. We have come to call this broader exploration of the interweaving of personal and social systems of meaning characteristic of adult learning and growth in our three sites a “cultures of mind” approach.

We are indebted to the adult learners who participated in our study for helping us expand our thinking so to better represent the aspects of their experiences not previously considered in adult developmental research. Based on an extensive consideration of our data, we believe this framing of our developmental perspective has multiple implications for teaching and learning in ABE/ESOL settings, which, for the purposes of discussion here, we have cast in three areas:

- 1. A richer understanding of aspects of ABE students’ experiences, invoking the need for a “new pluralism”**
- 2. A description of the developmental demands of ABE education, invoking the need for a broader conceptualization of its functions and purposes**
- 3. A prescription for possible features of classroom and program design, invoking the need for new approaches to program evaluation**

Here, we lay out the findings from our study and elaborate on their implications for future work in ABE settings.

#### **New Pluralism**

Adult educators have long understood the need to account for learner differences when fashioning curricula that both meet learners’ existing needs and challenge them to expand their perspectives. Among learners in our study, notable variations in educational background, social class, country of origin, ethnicity, gender, and social role meaningfully shape each individual’s classroom experience. The teachers we

encountered were thoughtfully intentional in creating classroom environments that met the needs of adult learners from varied backgrounds. In part, their success rested on an ability to seek out and take seriously the meaning learners were making of their classroom experiences.

In this monograph, we have called attention to a way of understanding learners' meaning-making and, by so doing, have pointed out yet another type of persistent, important difference among adult learners. Learners in each of the sites we studied demonstrated diversity in their developmental mindsets or ways of knowing. Prior research (Commons et al., 1990) on adult development anticipates this finding; it is common for adults who share a similar cultural background to nonetheless vary in their developmental positions despite similar ages or common backgrounds. Another way of saying this is that we do not expect age or ethnic background to predict adults' developmental positions. A question we brought to the present study was whether or not adults with widely varying ages and backgrounds (representing a greater variety than has been typically studied) would also demonstrate variations in developmental positions. Apart from adding to our understanding of adult development generally, this question matters for teachers and program designers who aim to listen closely to learners' reports on their experiences.

In each of our sites, we found that participants varied in their developmental positions along a continuum not unlike that shown by participants in previous research studies with more homogenous samples. At one end of the spectrum, Instrumental ways of understanding were dominant for at least one learner per site. Conversely, at the other end of the spectrum, there were several learners at each site for whom Self-Authoring ways of understanding were dominant. (In fact, at two of the sites, Even Start and Polaroid, there were learners who operated solely with Self-Authoring ways of understanding.) At all three sites, the majority of learners demonstrated some degree of Socializing ways of understanding. From a theoretical perspective, the range of developmental positions lends credence to the relevance of developmental position as an important form of diversity even among samples with wide variation in age and background. The diversity we found also addressed our initial concerns that developmental theories have traditionally described white, formally educated, and economically privileged adults. Critics of these theories might predict that learners from lower socioeconomic statuses or with fewer years of education, on average, than white middle class samples would likely show up on the lower end of the developmental continuum. In fact, we found the range in the complexity of ABE/ESOL learners in our study is not markedly different from the range found among samples of native English speaking adults with varying

educational backgrounds and widespread socioeconomic levels.<sup>1</sup> The distribution of developmental mindsets reported in research studies tends to correspond with ours, where the largest group of participants demonstrate some aspects of Socializing ways of understanding, with fewer participants governed by either Instrumental or Self-Authoring ways of understanding.

The profile of ABE/ESOL learners does *not*, therefore, skew toward the low end of a developmental continuum. Furthermore, differences in developmental capacity were not highly associated with level of formal education. ABE/ESOL learners with limited formal education, such as Jeff at Polaroid or Dalia at Even Start, nonetheless demonstrate developmentally complex ways of knowing and both are Self-Authoring knowers. Nor does formal education guarantee higher levels of complexity. At all three sites, there are learners who completed some university study in their home country who do not yet demonstrate Self-Authoring capacities.

From a practical perspective, we imagine that teachers who are already masters of attending closely to important differences among students can use the additional frame of developmental position to organize their understandings of how groups of students might make sense of important events in similar ways. In fact, we argue that one way of capturing and applying the insights of a developmental perspective that links our contribution to the framework of existing debates in ESOL/ABE settings is to suggest that a range of developmental positions in a classroom represent a new form of *pluralism*. At first, this suggestion may seem counter-intuitive, as our framework specifies the forms of understanding linked to particular positions rather than the many differences among individual voices. Our data analysis suggests that learners' unique voices can compel our attention in their individual differences while simultaneously being considered from the viewpoint of consistencies linked to developmental position. Essentially, we suggest that the construct of pluralism needs to be roomy enough to include any perspective that helps make sense of important differences among sub-groups in a classroom experiences.

Our findings can be further extrapolated to suggest that teachers and program developers might likely find and should therefore be prepared to have developmentally diverse populations in any given ABE/ESOL program. The distinctions among these developmental mindsets indicate that these groups of learners will experience their learning and their programs in fundamentally different ways. (While the largest number of students might share some aspects of Socializing ways of understanding, many might be bound by Instrumental or Self-Authoring

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<sup>1</sup> See R. Kegan, *In Over Our Heads* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 195.

ways of understanding.) Not only are they likely to experience the same activities and information differently, they may therefore respond best to different kinds of supports and different kinds of challenges. We invite adult educators to take these forms of difference into account when considering learners' experiences.

The diversity among learners' ways of knowing therefore calls for a second aspect of new pluralism. To attend to all students' learning needs, educators must consider their pedagogical stances and strategies from multiple perspectives. This amounts to a new definition of the "resource rich" classroom—one that includes good pedagogical matches to a variety of students' cultures of mind. Our study thus suggests the value of ABE/ESOL practitioners developing a deep understanding of this new variable—culture of mind—as expressed in the ABE/ESOL setting and seeks to be a resource for practitioners who want to develop this understanding. Orienting to the diversity of developmental mindsets in addition to the other important types of diversity among learners can give ABE/ESOL teachers and program developers powerful new insights into learners' experiences and the ways that programs can respond to their strengths and needs.

In asking practitioners to be receptive to a new pluralism among learners, we are not suggesting they should only orient to the differences among learners. As we have stated throughout this monograph, despite the readily apparent differences among the learners in our study, a cultures of mind approach enables us to understand important similarities among them. This approach demonstrates there are consistent and predictable ways in which learners who share a developmental position also share important ways of understanding themselves, their learning, and their environment. We see these similarities across a range of aspects of learners' lives, including the ways they conceive of their experiences, their aspirations, their classrooms and teachers, the programs and institutions in which they are enrolled, and their relationships to U.S. culture and their native cultures.

A final aspect of our new pluralism lens is that neither the differences nor the similarities among learners are fixed. In that respect, our study challenges expectations about the possibilities for change in adult learners' ways of knowing. Often, those who are newly introduced to and excited about developmental psychology want to know how they can inspire transformational changes in themselves and others. We remind them that increases in complexity are necessarily gradual and incremental, and if and when notables changes occur, they may be measurable over the course of years or even decades. Developmental psychologists are therefore likely to expect to see no qualitative developmental change in individuals observed for as brief a period as one year. It may come as a surprise then

that several of the ABE/ESOL learners in our study underwent such development. These changes were particularly remarkable at the Polaroid site, where 8 of 16 learners demonstrated higher levels of complexity in their final interviews than at the time they entered their diploma program. For learners who showed increases in their level of development,<sup>2</sup> our theory would argue that they had greater capacities to take on and manage the complexities of their lives across relevant roles, such as worker, parent, learner. We posit, therefore, that for these learners, ABE/ESOL learning is in itself a developmental event, in which learners are invited to consider and perhaps alter or elaborate on their previous ways of knowing.

In the remainder of this chapter, we will revisit the ways our cultures of mind approach contributes to a better understanding of learners' self-conceptions, illustrating how their developmental capacities help us understand learners' purposes and motivations for learning, their sense of internal control over their lives, and the ways that they reclaim and reconstruct various aspects of their social identities. Where relevant, we will also describe how students' conceptions changed over the course of their program by either growing increasingly elaborate or increasingly complex.

We will also revisit important similarities and differences in students' descriptions of their classrooms and programs. Students with similar developmental mindsets reported similar definitions and explanations of good teaching, helpful learning activities and experiences, and supportive classroom cultures. There are also similarities in the ways that they construct ongoing relationships to U.S. culture and their native cultures. Additionally, the ways these conceptions differ across different developmental mindsets is an equally important part of our findings. Drawing on these similarities and differences, we offer several implications for practitioners within the ABE/ESOL field. Finally, we suggest it is important to consider why so many learners developed against expectation and propose that a well-structured program with the right mix of design features and skilled teaching can move adults further and faster in their development than is the typical trajectory in adult life.

#### **Better Understandings of Aspects of Learner Experiences**

In light of the ways that students' understandings of themselves are likely to differ in important ways and have the potential to change over the course of a program,

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<sup>2</sup> Conceivably, learners for whom clear advances were made in the elaboration or consolidation of their meaning-systems (but who did not evince a measurable change in developmental level) could be included in the group for whom ABE programs were a developmental event.

teachers might conceive of the ABE setting as a context for self-recreation and elaboration. This process became particularly apparent to us as we watched learners new to the English language and to U.S. culture grow increasingly confident and comfortable in their new home. For recent immigrants, the experience of moving into a new culture presents multiple and formidable challenges. The challenges of learning English and of understanding and performing key skills and behaviors valued in U.S. culture and institutions may combine to threaten an individual's sense of identity. Unable to express who one is or how one knows can cause an individual to experience difficulty in establishing mutually satisfying relationships with Americans. Such challenges essentially constitute threats to one's way of knowing. Entering an ABE/ESOL program can therefore facilitate an immigrant student's reclamation of an identity in the new culture. At Even Start, for example, parents re-establish confidence in their role while also elaborating on existing skills and perspectives to bring in newer, broader options for how they might parent.

Our cultures of mind approach helps us see how American ABE students are also undergoing related transitions. Although they may not experience the same dramatic sense of loss and stress that accompanies a move to a new culture, these students demonstrated similar processes of identity re-creation. In all cases, these changes constituted increases in skills and knowledge, which gave learners access to new possibilities at work, as students, and as parents. Across all three settings, we noticed that learners' purposes and motivations grew more elaborate, including new and perhaps previously unrecognized possibilities. In many cases, these new goals include plans for continued education. For example, at BHCC, Minh reported that her success in the first semester of the program enabled her to consider transferring to a more competitive four-year university. At Polaroid, Rita decided she valued her learning so much that she began to develop the wish to attend at least two years of college after receiving her high school diploma.

Our initial explorations of this topic have helped us see interesting consistencies across students' descriptions of their reasons for enrolling, consistencies which are linked to developmental capacity. Students operating with Instrumental ways of understanding orient to concrete goals and skills they hope to acquire through their participation in ABE/ESOL programs. These students describe the types of work tasks they do and do not want to perform, and they aspire to support themselves and their families with better-paying jobs and desirable benefits packages. Students governed by Socializing ways of understanding also mention these goals as important to their entrance in their programs. However, they also orient to more abstract reasons for enrolling and attending, frequently describing how important others might value their increased learning. These students often refer to

their desires to fulfill their parents' hopes, earn their children's respect, or find societal approval. In addition to valuing the concrete rewards of increased education, they are able to appreciate learning for its own sake and careers as aspects of their identity involving more than specific work tasks. Self-Authoring knowers at all three sites focus more on how increased education can give them the ability to exercise or enhance greater self-direction. They are less likely to value concrete aspects of their work, such as increased salary, as goals in themselves and more likely to view them as means to achieving other self-identified goals.

The acquisition of new skills and knowledge enabled all learners to re-connect to or elaborate on their identities, including their goals and aspirations. As some of these learners undertook these changes, their very ways of knowing were also transformed. These transformations enabled and necessitated new forms of self-re-creation, and learners' purposes and motivations grew in the direction of increasing complexity. Transformational changes were particularly evident at Polaroid, where learners with some elements of Instrumental knowing, such as Bill, Renada, Sal, Hope, and Rita, grew to recognize and orient more to their own and others' internal psychological experiences as important to their goals and purposes for participating in the diploma program. Three Polaroid learners—Paulo, Daniel, and Magda—increasingly viewed their expanding skills and knowledge in light of self-authored goals and purposes.

The differences in and changes to these students' orientations suggests that ABE/ESOL teachers might best serve their students by providing curricula including a variety of elements directed toward different types of personal development and skill gain. Although many learners operating primarily with Instrumental ways of understanding will feel that their identity reclamation could best be achieved by acquiring and performing new sets of skills, other learners who have developed Socializing and Self-Authoring ways of knowing are likely to be unsatisfied by programs that focus only on skills. These students are apt to be interested in focusing on how these skills are part of larger contexts and how they might serve larger purposes. These learners appreciate having a curriculum that affords them opportunities to reflect on their own lives.

When we consider familiar tensions between orientations toward “informational” learning (or skill development) vs. “transformational” learning (or personal empowerment), our findings suggest that the content and the organization of goals and motives are associated with developmental position and can be pushed in important ways by developmentally attuned curricula. Developmentalists have commented on the emergence of the capacity to name and reflect on goals as a

developmental accomplishment (Nakkula, personal communication) and one that needs to be scaffolded in adolescents. Other researchers have suggested that forming goals that adequately capture the tension between current accomplishments and future aims requires developing Self-Authoring forms of knowing (Fritz, 2000). Our study contributes to these findings and supports teacher practice by demonstrating through examples how ABE learners construct, reshape, and reflect on their goals, motives, and purposes for program participation.

Apart from the learners' hopes, we also explored their sense of control over their lives and their satisfaction with life as two important aspects of the learner experience. The results of our paper and pencil measures suggest learners with higher levels of development were more likely to indicate that they perceived they had internal control over their lives. This finding seems consistent with what developmental psychologists might expect. For example, individuals who demonstrate Self-Authoring capacities can identify and orient to the perspective of important others in their lives and of the larger cultures they inhabit. However, their understandings are not bound by these perspectives. Instead, Self-Authoring individuals possess the ability to evaluate the usefulness of these perspectives in light of their own individually constructed purposes. It seems logical, therefore, to expect that the demonstration of these capacities might correspond to stronger perceptions of internal control over one's own life.

Having speculated on the reasons we find this association between individuals' perceptions of control and developmental capacity, we feel it is important to note our own hesitations in unreservedly embracing this interpretation. Individuals can also demonstrate Self-Authoring capacities through the act of recognizing and critiquing constraints social institutions impose on their power and authority. For example, whether or not many learners in our study maintain their social role as students or workers is dependent on institutional decisions about financial aid or workplace layoffs. These participants may understandably feel important areas of their lives are governed by others' decisions. Thus, it is possible for a Self-Authoring student to perceive she has little control over some important events in her life while retaining authority for the meaning she assigns to these events.

We therefore wonder whether this finding might be replicated by subsequent studies and underscore the need to further examine the relationship between developmental complexity and perceptions of control. One implication we can draw from these findings serves as a caution to educators. Students who struggle with a sense of their own mastery/control over their experiences might require different

types of support depending on their developmental position. These students cannot necessarily be instructed to feel a greater sense of internal control over their lives if such changes require increases in ways of knowing, nor should they be discouraged from actively naming the impositions powerful social forces make on their agency.

It is also important to note that learners with higher levels of development do not necessarily report being happier individuals. Our results show no correlation—positive or negative—between the complexity of learners’ ways of knowing and their “satisfaction with life.” Thus, achieving a higher stage of development might afford individuals increased capacities for certain types of understanding or competence and might enable them to resist cultural values that might devalue them, but these capacities do not necessarily lead to greater happiness.

Considering how the forms of experience learners undergo in ABE/ESOL settings are filtered through developmental position offers teachers and program designers new types of awareness. However, it would be inappropriate to suggest that practitioners should be able to developmentally evaluate their students on the basis of everyday classroom interaction. There is no reliable way of assessing an individual’s way of knowing without using such psychological measurements as the subject-object interview, an interview-based instrument requiring generous amounts of time and training to administer and analyze. Instead, we recommend that practitioners consider the cultures of mind lens more for its descriptive value than as a diagnostic tool. As such, this lens illustrates for practitioners the developmental diversity that likely exists in any group of students and provides an awareness of how a way of knowing may shape understanding. It suggests that practitioners might consider flexibility in program design to meet a variety of learner needs.

Orienting to similarities among learners who share a developmental mindset can help us map the larger processes of human change and growth. But in drawing educators’ attention to this map, we hope not to deflect attention from our initial reason for beginning the endeavor: exploring the richness and vastness of individual and collective human experiences in learning. Thus, rather than functioning as a short-cut or substitute for attentive listening, we feel a cultures of mind lens can provide a tool helping practitioners listen more carefully and responsively, and come closer to grasping the meaning the learner assigns to the experience. Enhancing this capacity alone can have a notable impact on classrooms and teaching and help students feel recognized, understood, valued, and supported for the meanings they bring to their learning.

### Functions and Purposes of ABE Education

In this section, we turn away from the ways a cultures of mind approach contributes to better understanding of how students view themselves and their lives. Now, we consider how this approach offers new insights into the ways students conceive of the programs, institutions, and larger cultures in which they participate. A critical role for developmental theory is to critique and reframe the role of education in students' lives. There are many vociferous perspectives in the ABE/ESOL literature on the validity of its current purposes and how they might be refashioned. One influential perspective construes ABE settings as contexts for the preservation of existing power systems. Our data suggest that, in addition to the other perspectives shaping these conversations, it is worth considering how learners' meaning systems affect how they perceive the tokens of power.

For example, as Socializing knowers internalize the values and messages of those they identify as authority figures or experts, they may be good candidates for induction into cultural values and norms, and they may be particularly vulnerable to the ways structural inequities in institutions and cultures might devalue or discount important aspects of their identities. However, as is the case at BHCC, students who can rely on supportive friends, parents, and teachers to mitigate the effects of these messages are often able to retain largely positive self-images. At Even Start, learners' past histories and specific features of both U.S. culture and the cultures they left influence students' friendliness to the particular values and norms implicit in the parenting curriculum. Thus, a Socializing learner such as Raquelle, who embraced the parenting values championed at Even Start, described these values as sustaining and refining values she already held.

Self-Authoring learners have the capacity to evaluate the ways institutions and cultures value them and others. They can therefore resist wholesale induction into a culture or institution and can construct critiques of the ways that these environments impinge on their ability to enact their own purposes and values. However, as Instrumental or Socializing learners have not developed the ability to generate these critiques, expecting all learners to demonstrate or quickly develop these capacities makes inappropriate demands on many students.

We recommend that teachers exercise a sense of vigilance about the developmentally driven ways students are likely to experience cultural and institutional values. Remaining aware of the potential vulnerabilities of Socializing learners while also considering the ways these vulnerabilities will vary across learners can help teachers and program developers design curricula and learning

environments that properly support students and enable them to extend their capacities. We see evidence of these types of support at Even Start, where Linn struggles with competing loyalties. She wishes to support the development of her children and understands their needs as coming first. Yet Linn also feels a strong urge to develop herself, reclaim her professional identity, and expand her knowledge of the world and herself. As a Socializing knower, Linn experiences the conflict in either/or terms, whereby she must be loyal to her children's needs or to her own. However, the structure of the Even Start program enables Linn to forestall this choice as it is designed to meet both parents' and children's needs concurrently. Participation in the program helps her reconnect to her identity as a lifelong learner without jeopardizing her beliefs about the importance of her children's development.

Learners who have not yet developed Self-Authoring capacities could also be well-served by teachers, curricula, and other support services that explicitly address the cultural inequalities these students face. For example, some students at BHCC who were aware of and advised to drop classes or ask teachers questions to cope with difficulties in their learning were able to exercise these options on their own behalf.

Our developmental perspective also provides implications for the ways that ABE educators define, teach, and measure competence. Our framework helps us see that many desired skills or competencies can be performed successfully from a wide range of developmental ways of knowing, although the purposes and nature of the performance will depend on the complexity of the way of knowing. It also illustrates that appropriate goals for one student's performance will be inappropriate for another student operating with different developmental capacities. Thus, although one student may understand the importance of reading to her son every evening as a concrete step or skill she must demonstrate to be a good parent, another parent understands reading to her daughter as an opportunity to discuss with her child the values promoted by a book. Although each parent displays specific skills and behaviors, the second parent understands and perhaps performs these behaviors differently.

We imagine an awareness of different meaning systems can inform the expectations ABE/ESOL educators cast for their students. Orienting only to skill development may leave the second parent feeling she has not been supported in exploring the purposes and contexts of these skills. Asking all learners to demonstrate familiarity with the larger and more abstract values of reading to one's child may doom the first mother to feeling or being labeled incompetent. Developmentally conscious educators can account for the different ways students demonstrate competence and also scrutinize their overall program goals and

individual lesson objectives for ways they might be inappropriately cueing students to perform at a certain level of complexity in the meaning system.

Practitioners can also benefit by remaining alert to the ways students' ways of knowing might also transform over the course of a program. In recognizing and welcoming ongoing forms and expressions of growth and change, teachers can support students' newly emerging identities. Educators might then consider whether one of their goals should be to help students challenge and transform their ways of knowing. While such transformations clearly are supported by the ways that teachers, curricula, and fellow students interact with each other, we suggest that practitioners would do better to see themselves as accompanying and upholding learners in this process, rather than causing it. In this monograph, we have tried to emphasize that all learners—those whose ways of knowing grow measurably more complex and those who elaborate upon their existing way of knowing—are engaged in a process of change and development. This course of motion and growth is one that all individuals have undertaken and the participants in our study had therefore already embarked upon when they entered their programs. That we witnessed such dramatic change is testament to the ways the learners continued to reconsider and reshape their lives. It is also testament to the success of the programs and teachers in joining and supporting the students in this process.

We also suggest that, in inviting development, educators should consider the potential costs as well as the gains to individual learners. Rather than imposing these expectations upon learners in the form of curricular or programmatic requirements, a necessary first step for meaningful learning depends on how well educators can meet students where they are, orienting to their existing frames of knowing. Educators might consider how they can develop goals in conversation with their students, taking into account learners' purposes and motivations for enrolling in these programs.

Finally, important forms of change can occur without transformation. At every site, learners were able to expand their understanding by incorporating new learning through their existing ways of knowing. All participants describe acquiring additional knowledge and skills in their programs, and for many, these changes resulted in modifications to the contents rather than the forms of their meaning making. Such changes are important because they can enable participants to retain a sense of coherence, increase their confidence, and amplify their personal agency.

### Features of Classroom and Program Design

How educators frame the purposes of adult learning necessarily influences the formats and features of classroom and program design. With moves to formalize the purposes of adult education, such as the Clinton administration's efforts to make possible "a fully literate nation" by the year 2002 (Stein 2000), overall objectives filter down to local designs for learning, such as those crafted by program developers in the three sites we studied. Often, design choices tend to mirror larger political or philosophical debates about the purposes of learning, including, for example, that between defenders of student empowerment through use of curricula relevant for meeting the challenges of daily life versus proponents of standardized curricula that focus on skill mastery.

A developmental perspective neither favors nor condones either of these viewpoints. Instead, it suggests that student choices or preferences for their learning tend to be shaped by their developmental position. In each of our sites, adult learners shared their perspectives on what aspects of their program or classroom experiences were most helpful to them. In each setting, Instrumental students' preferences tend to coalesce around more directed, teacher-led forms of instruction whereas Self-Authoring learners tend to prefer student-led, inquiry-based forms of learning. Socializing learners prefer and benefit from program designs that assist them in understanding cultural mores and institutional expectations while connecting to peers and teachers in supportive, confidence-enhancing relationships. A straightforward implication of this finding is that adult educators might use a developmental perspective to ensure students' actual preferences are taken into account when debating the merits of different forms of instruction.

A less evident implication of this finding, but one which is supported by research with adult learners in settings beyond ESOL/ABE, is that program designers benefit from considering what Russian educational psychologist Vygotsky termed learners' "zone of proximal development." Learners are ripe for educational experiences directed to their growing edge. The "zone" describes the era of development between their current developmental position and their emerging position. The task for educators is to fashion learning experiences that consolidate current understanding while encouraging new growth. Finding this "fit" between what is and what will be in the learners' understanding is a key motivation for developmental educators. Conversely, if the learners' "zone" is either not considered or poorly assessed, learners will experience the lack of fit between their program and their needs cognitively as confusion and emotionally as a stressor. (Kegan (1994) calls the dilemma adults experience when expectations are beyond our current

developmental level as being “in over our heads.”) The push in adult education toward inclusion of forms of cultural critique in classroom settings is an example of an agenda well-suited for some learners but experienced as an overwhelming challenge by others.

Similarly, considerations of how to pace the introduction of new forms of thinking, such as self-reflection or critical inquiry (typically associated with the emergence of more Self-Authorizing ways of knowing), can benefit from a developmental analysis. In settings such as BHCC, where learners are entering the early stages of “higher education,” development of critical thinking is an explicit goal. In such a setting, students who begin two years of study already demonstrating the Socializing way of knowing are more likely to be competent critical thinkers by the program’s conclusion than are those who enter as Instrumental knowers. Program designers and teachers can better or more fairly set expectations for the time it takes to help students build higher-order thinking skills if they are aware of the developmental gains such a goal implies. As noted above, prior research in adult development cautions that it is unlikely learners will move a full position over the course of an academic year even when appropriately challenged to do so. Thus, like all adult educators, ABE/ESOL teachers and program designers may set learning goals that unwittingly require a way of knowing or “culture of mind” more complex than that of any given learners’ current or emergent position. Staying aware of how these learners perceive these demands is a first step in improving the fit between learning challenge and learner capacity. A second step is actively interpreting particular educational demands through a developmental lens: What is the program or teacher demanding of students from the perspective of their current “culture of mind?”

#### **Student-Teacher Relationships**

Learners in our study informed us directly and emphatically about their preferences for the contour and character of the student–teacher relationship. In every setting, we asked how learners thought good teachers ought to teach and how they might demonstrate their concern for students’ learning and well-being. Participants across sites who shared a developmental position consistently identified similar aspects of the student–teacher relationship as critical or advisable. Our findings suggest that, like Instrumental knowers in other adult learning settings, those in our study express strong preferences for teachers who convey clearly and with careful specificity their expectations of students as well as the content of a set of discrete, predetermined, teacher-led lessons. They prefer teachers who model excellence and provide explicit guidelines for acceptable work. Clear standards are equated with demonstrated

authority, which is both desirable and reassuring. Instrumental learners in our study feel ill at ease with teachers who raise questions about the nature of knowledge or who request student commentary on possible alternatives to authority's point of view.

Instrumental learners in each of our sites view teachers as resources who can help them make progress toward their learning goals. Our findings suggest these learners feel supported and cared for when teachers structure the learning experience, provide rewards for evident progress, and transmit bodies of relevant knowledge with certainty and authority while supporting skill development.

We find that Socializing learners across sites prefer teachers who coax them to express their understanding as it becomes consolidated. Like Instrumental knowers, they also appreciate teaching methods that build their skills (especially around language proficiency). They also look for teachers who will help them broaden their own goals, confirm their sense of competence, and reach out with personal warmth as advocates and champions of their success. These learners in our study feel supported when teachers make a personal investment in their development.

Few participants in our study demonstrate a Self-Authoring way of knowing. Those who do echo the expectations of adult learners in prior research. They look for teachers who help actively construct a learning community in which multiple perspectives on an issue, concept, or academic discipline are engaged and valued. They use teacher critiques to inform and shape their own performance standards. We also find that these learners use the processes of education to hone their evaluations of the norms and values of their cultures of origin and adopted culture. They appreciate teachers who can engage with them in their discovery of their own capacities and the re-creation of their identities.

A developmental approach oriented to learners' different meaning systems informs the differing criteria students will bring to their preferred teaching processes and personal and professional qualities of teachers. For teachers who aim to extend themselves to the broadest possible range of students, a developmental perspective can lend meaning to potentially puzzling differences in student responses to the teacher's practice and presence. It may serve to build tolerance for these differences and point to possibilities for enhancing flexibility in teachers' styles. It can also help teachers gauge how students accustomed to other forms of pedagogy might receive innovations in their practice.

### Importance of a Learner Cohort

Learners at all three sites described their experiences working collaboratively with cohort members as academically and emotionally beneficial. As with other aspects of their classroom experiences, students who share a developmental position reported similar perceptions of how their peers enhanced their learning and emotional well-being. Learners operating with Instrumental ways of understanding described how collaborative learning activities helped them achieve concrete goals such as identifying valuable practical strategies for learning and problem solving, arriving at the correct answer, improving their communication skills, experiencing comradeship, and developing new respect for their own and others' ideas. In addition to these features, Socializing learners also describe additional social and emotional benefits of collaborative learning, including feeling more comfortable asking questions and less afraid to speak English in front of others. The sense of care and connection these learners experience is important in how they understand and are understood by others. Collaborative activities help these learners attune to each other's feelings and experiences, improving their opportunities to develop mutually empathic relationships. Self-Authoring learners describe the ways the varying perspectives of their peers enhance their learning and teaching processes. They appreciate their peer group's intellectual and cultural diversity and may seek out differences of opinion, culture, and experience instead of finding comfort in similarity and sameness. These learners use the other students' ideas and feelings to further their self-understanding, social support, and self-expansion.

These findings suggest several implications for educators about the benefits of creating opportunities for students to work in groups. The first will ring true for many practitioners who already know that collaborative learning experiences hold the potential for giving learners valuable means of academic and emotional support. We also see these types of learning as offering opportunities for students to reconsider aspects of their knowing. In sharing and negotiating with their peers, students may also experience important forms of challenge to their existing ideas and even their existing ways of knowing.

Furthermore, the differences in the ways students understand these experiences indicate that any one model of collaborative learning may not adequately attend to all students' learning needs. As described in the Polaroid chapter, three different models in the collaborative learning literature correspond to the three ways of knowing Polaroid learners demonstrate. Depending on their developmental capacity, some students oriented to the goals of more than one of the models. If classrooms generally contain the diversity across ways of knowing evidenced in each

site in our study, teachers who use one model of collaborative learning at the expense of the others are likely to leave some learners feeling frustrated or unchallenged. Instead, we recommend that teachers incorporate elements of each of the three models into their practice to allow all learners in a classroom to find features of support and challenge.

Overall, our research responds to the call for further meaning-centered explorations of the ABE experience, invoking the need for rich and theory-*complicating* rather than theory-*confirming* sources of data. Such explorations aid us in conceptualizing the functions and purposes of ABE education in ways consistent with the multifaceted and sometimes contradictory perspectives' of the participants themselves.

Our study is informed by both our developmental orientation and characteristic debates in ABE around the fundamental purposes of (and approaches to) adult basic education. These debates are necessarily polarized; advocates for a focus on basic skill-building in support of workforce preparation are likely to be at odds with those who champion an emancipatory approach to curricular reform centered around the development of an empowered, critically-conscious citizenry.

Among learners in our study, however, we encountered more nuanced and relativized perspectives. Some of our participants described wanting to build skills to become more effective advocates for their school-aged children, and others desired greater self-awareness so that they might more generously and substantively contribute to their work team. Our learners, in short, did not sound like theorists, policymakers, or practitioners. They talked like people in the midst of making meaning of ongoing, complex, vital, purposeful, and surprising experiences. We took pains to capture their sensibilities over time and through multiple modalities of data collection because the emergence of these meanings is of greatest interest and importance to us. In essence, we took up the call for learner-centered qualitative explorations because we perceive that the boldest evolution of theory, policy, and practice in ABE will come from closely attending to the articulated yearnings of its constituents. Because learners' meanings are expressed not in service of a dedicated (and therefore entrenched) position but as an active reflection on real experience, theorists, policymakers, and practitioners can respectfully draw from their pool of knowledge to shape recommendations for new directions in the field.

Our work focused primarily on the understandings of learners. We urge researchers in the field to expand on our work to consider closely also the meaning-making of teachers in ABE settings, who, like learners, typically encounter barriers to their capacities to act in ways they find effective and professionally satisfying. Active debates over directions for teacher development, teacher socialization, and the

professionalization of the field would benefit from richer understandings of teachers' preferences for their own learning. Under-resourced, under-compensated, and often under-appreciated, teachers—like learners in ABE settings—face issues of social and economic marginalization. Like learners, some teachers find ways to work successfully in the context of considerable constraints. By studying effective teachers and exploring their meaning making, we might identify aspects of professionalism associated with success *in spite of* constraints and *in the midst of* the slow process of systematic reform.

#### Final Note

One criticism of developmental psychology in general is that it tends not to account for context when describing or explaining how personal meanings come into being. Because the nature of its primary forms of analysis are “structural”—attending to the logic of how people make sense more than the content of their sense-making—context tends to be underplayed. The earlier successes of developmental perspectives in raising school teachers' awareness of persistent interpretations children make of the natural world, moral dilemmas, or social interactions, are due largely to the convenient consistencies of the school environment. Schools are normative environments in which the expectations are spelled out, the goals for learning are clear, and the behaviors expected of children are well understood by the adults who shape the learning experience. In essence, the context is well defined and shared.

One of the difficulties of taking developmental frameworks to the study of adult learners rests with the reality that as adulthood progresses, shared contexts become rarer—adults typically have choice in the roles they take on and their learning activities, which vary greatly and reflect personal as well as institutional goals. When the adults studied also come from very different backgrounds and are engaged in a broad variety of learning experiences, the differences begin to rightly outweigh the similarities. The challenges to a developmental perspective presented by this study were thus weighty and exhaustive. Finding any consistencies in the meaning systems of 41 learners across three settings who report very different personal backgrounds, countries of origin, and histories of educational experiences was, in short, unlikely.

The evidence, however, suggests that a developmental framework at the very least helps organize our understanding of the different experiences of learners, their educational goals and aims, and the concomitant experiences of teachers in classrooms who intend to make their learning a sustained possibility. The extensive

attention paid throughout this report to learners' meaning making is facilitated, we believe, by the systematic methods developmental theory provides for attending to the developmental differences in adult learners' understandings.

At best, a cultures of mind approach also recognizes the significance of individuals' *similarities* in meaning-making, despite important influences of culture, language, social role, and even era of the lifespan. In a period of our own advance as a culture in which articulation and appreciation of difference represents an important marker of social evolution, it feels intellectually awkward to emphasize the rich understanding of the similar. Yet learners in this study who share a developmental position also share a loyalty and adherence to a way of making meaning that is the product of their own persistent engagement with the struggle to know. The consistencies apparent in these ways of knowing do not dilute their importance or the extent of their influence on learners' experiences.

In part, the implications of our study's findings will be worked out in practice and future policy debates as adult education stakeholders lay claim to them, either to support their own legitimate purposes or unseat rival claims to legitimacy. As developmental psychologists, educators, and now champions ourselves of the profoundly ennobling project that is adult basic education, we invite readers into conversation with us.

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