

CLASSROOM DYNAMICS IN ADULT LITERACY EDUCATION

by

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**NCSALL Reports #18a
Report Summary**

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NCSALL Reports are funded by the Educational Research and Development Centers Program, Award Number R309B60002, as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement/ National Institute of Postsecondary Education, Libraries, and Lifelong Learning, U.S. Department of Education, through contract to Harvard University. The contents of NCSALL Reports do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the National Institute on Postsecondary Education, Libraries, and Lifelong Learning; the Office of Educational Research and Improvement; or the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government.

Introduction

What happens in adult literacy education classrooms? How is instruction delivered, and what is its content? What are the processes that underlie teaching and learning, and what forces outside the classroom shape classroom behavior? These questions are crucial to an understanding of adult literacy. Yet only one major study that investigated adult literacy classroom behavior in the United States—*Last Gamble on Education* (Mezirow, Darkenwald & Knox, 1975)—has preceded this study.

An understanding of what happens in adult literacy education classrooms is critical for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers alike. When policy is made in the absence of a basic understanding of classroom behavior, ill-informed policies that are impractical, ineffective, and even damaging can result. Although most program administrators may have a basic understanding of what happens in their program's classrooms and teachers are obviously familiar with their own classes, they do not necessarily understand what happens in other programs. This lack of exposure to other approaches restricts adult educators' ability to know about and use alternative strategies to improve practice. Researchers must also have a thorough understanding of classroom teaching and learning if they are to pose relevant research questions.

In this research, we seek to provide a detailed and comprehensive description of classroom behavior in adult literacy education. To accomplish this, trained data collectors observed 20 diverse adult literacy education classes in eight states on two separate occasions. Each observation lasted at least one and one-half hours and was supplemented by a 45-minute interview with the teacher. The study addressed three basic questions:

- What is the content of instruction, and how is content structured?
- What social processes characterize the interactions of teachers and learners in the classroom?
- What forces outside the classroom shape classroom behavior?

Methodology

As there was very little prior research on classroom behavior in adult literacy to guide us, we selected a methodology known as grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), which generates understanding and theoretical propositions from the data rather than testing or verifying theory or hypotheses determined in earlier research. In grounded theory methodology, data are collected from a limited sample of cases (in this case, classes) and analyzed to find commonalities, themes, and categories that describe the phenomenon in question. Unlike in research using representative sampling and quantitative data, the findings are not meant to be generalized to an entire population. Instead, they help generate understanding as well as theoretical propositions and hypotheses for future research.

Sample Selection

This study, which is qualitative in design, uses a sample size of 20 sites for two reasons: The number provides sufficient data for meaningful analysis, and limited resources prevented data collection from more sites. As a qualitative, grounded theory methodology precludes generalization to a larger population, we did not seek to create a representative sample. Instead, the sample design maximizes the diversity of the classes studied. We did this by first identifying characteristics that previous research has shown to significantly affect adult literacy education. They are:

- Location (urban, rural, suburban)
- Skill level (beginning level, intermediate, preparing for the tests of General Educational Development (GED)).
- Institutional sponsorship (public school, community college, community-based organization)
- Program type (basic literacy, workplace literacy, family literacy, welfare-sponsored classes)
- Instruction type (group-based, individualized, blend of the two)
- Class size (small (1–8 learners), medium (9–14 learners), large (15 or more learners)).

Each of these variables was represented by at least one of the classes studied. Classes were selected from Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, and California. Although these eight states are diverse, Northeastern states relatively close to New Jersey predominate because of our limited travel funds. Table One presents the distribution of characteristics across the classes selected for our sample:

Table One: Characteristics of Sample Classes

Program/Class Type	Number
Location:	
Urban	12
Suburban	5
Rural	3
Skill Level:	
Beginning	4
Intermediate	5
Advanced (GED)	5
Mixed	6
Institutional Sponsorship:	
Public School	9
Community College	4
Community-based Organizations	7
*Program Type:	
Basic literacy	18
Workplace Literacy	2
Family Literacy	4
Welfare-sponsored Classes	3
Instruction Type:	
Group-based	14
Individualized	3
Blend	3
Class Size:	
Small (1–8 learners)	7
Medium (9–14 learners)	10
Large (15 or more learners)	3

* Total exceeds 20 because some classes represented more than one type.

To identify individual classes for the study, we contacted adult literacy professionals—including program administrators, staff developers, and in one case, a state director—familiar with adult literacy programs in their area. They were asked to identify programs and/or classes that fit the selection criteria indicated in Table One. Contacts were instructed to identify programs and classes that were typical rather than best. Subsequently, we contacted the relevant program-level person to obtain classroom access (only about 5 percent refused), and our data collectors scheduled appointments with the teachers participating in the study.

Table Two presents the number of classes in the sample by state.

Table Two: Number of Sample Classes by State

State	# of classes in sample
California	3
Connecticut	1
Massachusetts	1
New Jersey	5
New York	3
Pennsylvania	4
Rhode Island	1
Tennessee	2

Data Collection

The study employed 10 data collectors. Patsy Medina, who had 20 years of experience in adult literacy education as a teacher, staff developer, and researcher, conducted approximately 25 percent of the observations and interviews. Of the remaining nine data collectors, six were graduate students in adult education at Rutgers University, one was a graduate student at Harvard University, one was a researcher employed by the University of Tennessee, and two were private consultants.

Data, collected between October 1997 and April 1999, consisted of two one-and-a-half hour classroom observations and a 45-minute teacher interview. Teachers were asked to complete a brief background survey that gathered information about the following:

- Their years of experience
- Their part- and full-time employment in adult literacy education
- The hours they worked per week
- The number of learners enrolled in their class
- The class's instructional level and ethnic composition
- The instructional materials they used
- How typical the observed class was in comparison to other classes they taught

Typically, the second observation of a class was conducted a week after the first, and the teacher was interviewed between observations. Teacher interviews featured open-ended questions and were linked directly to the first observation. Teachers were asked to explain what they had attempted to accomplish in the observed class and why. In addition, when necessary, the data collectors were directed to ask the teacher to clarify what had been observed. With this approach, the teacher interview was directly related to an observed class. Observations and interviews were audiotaped, and interviews were transcribed verbatim. The audiotapes of observations ensured accuracy and served as a source of direct quotes as the data collectors prepared comprehensive field notes.

Data Analysis

From the patterns of similarities and differences in the sample classes, we identified thematic categories that described what we had observed and had learned from the teacher interviews.

Observation of five classes early in the study generated an initial set of categories focused on the actions and interactions of teachers and learners (such as “helping” and “directing”). As more data were analyzed, categories were refined, and new categories were added.

Limitations

As this study is based on two observations in 20 classes, it represents a broad, panoramic, “macro” picture rather than an in-depth microanalysis. Given the lack of previous research on classroom behavior, however, a broad approach seemed the appropriate place to start. Although a microanalysis featuring fewer classes and considerably more observations per class might have allowed a more detailed analysis of such things as instructional strategies, we might have lost the larger perspective with such an approach.

A second limitation derives from the nature of classroom observation itself. Observation is a very direct and powerful but imperfect form of data collection. It enabled us to see classroom behavior directly, rather than rely on secondhand accounts given in interviews. However, it is filtered through the eyes of the observers, whose varied backgrounds and interests caused them to focus on slightly different behaviors in their data collection. Although observation can depict what is happening in a classroom, it cannot reveal what is in the minds of the participants. Thus, in some cases, we witnessed clearly important behaviors but were unable to infer their motivation. For example, we observed learners sleeping. Were they

exhausted? Were they bored? Was the lesson too easy or difficult for them? Observation alone could not answer these questions. Finally, it is always possible that the observers' presence influenced the observed behavior. As both the learners and our observers were adults and close scrutiny of our field notes did not indicate obvious distortions, we do not believe this was a significant problem.

The third limitation arises from the way we selected sites. Typically, program directors or staff developers nominated the sites. Although we asked nominators to select an "average" class of the type we were seeking, it is possible that they selected better classes and avoided the worst.

The Content and Structure of Instruction

In every class we observed, the basic unit of instruction was a lesson. In group-based instruction, lessons were universally prepared and delivered by the teacher, and in individualized instruction, lessons were embodied in the instructional materials learners used. The great majority of lessons followed a format described by Mehan (1979) in an observational study of elementary education.

As in Mehan's study, lessons opened with the teacher directing the learners to do an activity, typically a reading, writing, math, or GED-based instruction exercise. When the exercise was complete, teachers posed a series of questions and elicited learners' responses. During the elicitation, teachers determined whether those in the class had correctly learned the lesson, learners' correct responses to the activity were reinforced, and incorrect responses were corrected. Mehan termed this elicitation sequence IRE (Initiation, Reply, Evaluation). IRE was present in every class we observed, although there were also other forms of instruction in about 25 percent of the classes. The elicitation sequence was followed by closure, which signaled the end of the lesson and the beginning of something new.

Most of these elicitation episodes were what Mehan termed "product elicitations," a series of questions and answers designed to elicit correct, factual responses. In a minority of classes, we also observed "process elicitations," a series of questions designed to elicit learners' views and opinions. Elicitations designed to foster and garner expressions of learners' creativity or critical thinking were evident in only 4 of the 20 class sites. During lessons, communication was almost always teacher to learner and learner to teacher. Free-flowing learner-to-learner communication occurred in only a small minority of classes.

In our analysis of the structure and content of instruction, we divided the observed classes into two general types. The first was discrete skills instruction, characterized by teacher-prepared and teacher-delivered lessons conveying factual information and requiring literal recall by learners; the predominance of commercially published materials; lessons organized into distinct time periods with a clear beginning and end; and a focus on the skills that encompass such traditional subject areas as reading, writing, and math. Although we identified subcategories of discrete skills instruction, the category as a whole accounted for 16 of the 20 classes in our sample.

The second category was what is known as making meaning instruction, characterized by a focus on problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, and social awareness in addition to basic skills; an emphasis on process rather than structure; collaboration between teachers and learners; use of materials relevant to the learners; and teachers who function more as facilitators than as conveyors. Only 4 of the 20 classes were classified as using making meaning instruction.

There were strong parallels between what we observed in adult literacy education and what researchers have observed in elementary education. The reasons, we believe, are twofold. The first derives from the teachers' own socialization. All had experienced at least 12 years of elementary and secondary education as students, and the great majority had been trained as elementary or secondary level teachers and had taught in the K–12 system. Given this protracted and intense level of socialization, they had deeply ingrained teaching behavior. Moreover, learners expected the kind of instruction we witnessed. In fact, in one of the few instances in which a teacher deviated from the norm, a learner negatively sanctioned that teacher.

Many teachers also are aware that they have a relatively short period of time to prepare learners and believe that learners want and need to progress as quickly as possible toward achieving the goal of passing the GED tests. They employ a teacher-directed, discrete skills-oriented form of instruction because they believe it is the fastest and most efficient way to move learners forward.

Implications

If the essence of becoming literate is the acquisition of concrete skills and factual knowledge, the norm has merit. Indeed, it would be expected that highly systematic efforts focused on factual, discrete-skills instruction would yield good gains on most of the tests used to measure learning because these tests tend to measure this kind of skill acquisition.

If literacy also entails critical thinking, problem-solving ability, oral as well as writing proficiency, creativity, and an understanding of how society works, the norm we observed is substantially deficient. Will the current norm equip learners for success in higher education? Will it aid them in gaining good jobs with benefits and a future of increasing earnings? Will it help them be more effective parents and better citizens? Although a definitive answer to these fundamental questions is beyond the scope of this study, as researchers and literacy professionals we are concerned that the answer may be “probably not.”

If the literacy instruction that represents the norm needs reform, the issue becomes how to accomplish it. Although professional development is an obvious strategy, we doubt that additional doses of short-term, skill-oriented workshops will be sufficient. Given that teachers provide instruction in ways they know best and learners expect, changing their behavior may well take protracted and intense resocialization.

Meeting Learners’ Needs

In our interviews, we asked teachers to explain what they had intended to accomplish in the class we had observed. Their responses included:

- Teach life skills
- Create a positive learning atmosphere
- Interest and engage learners
- Develop independent and self-motivated learners
- Help learners pass the GED tests
- Meet learners’ needs (by far the most commonly expressed intention)

Despite a proclaimed emphasis on meeting learners’ needs, we saw little evidence of teachers systematically assessing learners’ needs or evaluating whether instruction was meeting individual or group needs. Instead, teachers seemed to have generalized conceptions of learners’ needs developed through their experience and supported by their own belief systems. In response to these generalized conceptions, lessons were typically geared to the class as a whole rather than specific individuals or groups. Exceptions to this practice were few.

Implications

The advent of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), which consolidated employment, training, and literacy programs and emphasizes accountability, makes learners' needs and how to address them an important issue. Should a legislative act establish the goals and objectives for the entire federal adult literacy system, or should goals and objectives vary according to the needs of learners? If the latter is most appropriate, instruction based on teachers' generalized conceptions may not be sufficient to meet learners' needs. Teachers may need to acquire and use skills and procedures for class-based needs assessment, subsequent curriculum development, and systematic evaluation.

Tardiness and Tuning-Out

Although the content and structure of instruction in adult literacy education and elementary and secondary education have marked similarities, their classroom processes differ.

Across our sample, we observed considerable tardiness and tuning out. Learners arrived in class up to an hour late, and tuning out ranged from short episodes of staring into space to sleeping in class. Unlike in most other educational settings, these behaviors were almost universally tolerated. When learners were tardy, they were expected to engage with the instruction as the class continued without interruption. Like tardiness, tuning out was rarely sanctioned negatively, and learners generally re-engaged after tuning out. Neither tardiness nor tuning out seemed to have a major impact on the social process. When exhibited, these behaviors were scarcely acknowledged. It is likely that these behaviors were tolerated simply because teachers considered them part of the reality of the adult literacy classroom—a reality they had to accept because they had little choice.

Implications

Although learners are clearly not engaged in the instruction when they are tardy or tuning out, we believe there is a more important concern. To a significant extent, tardiness is symptomatic of concerns that interfere with attendance, such as child-care, transportation, and work. Tuning out may be caused by fatigue, failure to comprehend the lesson, lessons that are too easy, or other reasons that interfere with learning. We suspect that the greatest significance of these behaviors is that they may signal an intention to drop out, an endemic problem for adult literacy education.

Through systematic research, we need to better understand how tardiness and tuning out relate to dropping out. This could lead to diagnostic procedures that would enable teachers to identify learners at risk of dropping out, while there is still an opportunity to intervene. It might also lead to new ways of teaching that could reduce the threat of dropping out.

Learner-Centered Instruction

Teachers' responses in the interviews suggested they wanted to be learner centered, but our classroom observations made it quite clear that instruction was highly teacher-directed. If teachers controlled the classroom, and if they intended to be learner centered, how could a teacher-directed system of instruction result? We concluded that teachers are so intensely socialized into a teacher-centered form of instruction that they cannot avoid it, regardless of their desire to be learner centered. However, we found that teachers behaved in learner-centered ways in their affective relationships with learners. In this sense, learner centeredness functioned not as a teaching technology or methodology but rather as a set of values that guided teacher-learner interactions.

Implications

There needs to be more discussion about the meaning of learner centeredness and the kind of instruction that produces it. If being learner centered is as desirable as the prescriptive literature suggests, it should be more fully reflected in the instruction learners receive.

Classroom Discussion

In more than three quarters of the classes we observed, teachers rarely asked about learners' values, attitudes, or opinions, and learners rarely volunteered them. If such expressions occurred, they were typically episodic and functioned as brief asides rather than being integrated into the lesson or becoming a bridge to further discussion. As a result, free-flowing discussions in which learners interacted with other learners were rare.

There are two possible explanations for what we observed. The first, most plausible, relates to the function of the lesson, the basic unit of instruction in the classes we observed. It may well be that teachers view expression of values,

attitudes, and opinions, and discussion around them, as deviations that might prevent completion of planned activities.

In two of the few discussions in which we witnessed learners freely expressing themselves, the discussion became acrimonious. Thus, some teachers may avoid open discussion because they fear it might get out of hand or because they lack the facilitation skills to guide the discussion in ways that result in something of educational value.

Implications

The lack of open discussion in which learners freely express values, attitudes, and opinions may be impeding development of important oral literacy skills. Even for the highly educated, most of the business of life is conducted orally, and the ability to make a convincing oral argument is important for success in the family, community, and workplace. Furthermore, discussions in which learners interact with other learners can develop such important group-dynamics skills as knowing when to assert and when to defer, or when to speak and when to listen.

If teachers fail to introduce discussion into the classroom because they lack facilitation skills, developing such skills is an obvious topic for professional development. If teachers fail to introduce discussion because they do not consider it an important aspect of literacy learning, curriculum development is warranted.

Community

Consistent with the literature on community in elementary and secondary education, we defined community as a collective sense of belonging among the members of a class. As the literature suggests and our findings reflect, community requires an environment of safety, trust, and peer acceptance.

Although nearly all the classes we observed exhibited some elements of community, in only about a quarter of the classes was community pervasive. We found three factors associated with community: learner collaboration with learners, teacher support for a community environment, and inclusion.

In some cases, learners collaborated freely with other learners without prompting from the teacher. In other instances, learners were directed to collaborate in such activities as editing. Collaborative relationships among learners were not

common, however, and tended to be brief when they occurred. We never observed learner work groups with stable memberships that worked together over a protracted period of time. This, we surmise, was at least partially caused by constantly changing class membership, produced by high attrition and absenteeism.

Our interviews made it clear that most teachers believed that establishing an environment conducive to community—an environment of respect and trust—was important. Our observations indicated that most teachers acted in ways to create such an environment at least some of the time. For example, teachers praised learners liberally and seldom sanctioned them negatively. Some teachers shared information about their personal lives with learners, thus reducing social distance, and some teachers leveled authority relationships by writing while learners wrote and interjecting humorous banter.

Inclusion—the act of purposefully and systematically inducting new learners into the group through such activities as exercises and formal introductions—is important if new members are to achieve the sense of belonging necessary for community. As most of the classes we observed practiced continuous enrollment, we witnessed the enrollment of many new learners during the course of this study. Yet inclusion activity was very rare. In most cases, learners simply were asked to take a seat and expected to engage on their own.

Implications

As our research did not include an outcome assessment component, we cannot infer with certainty that community has a positive effect on learning. Nevertheless, because elementary and secondary education literature concludes that community has beneficial effects on such things as dropout rates, social engagement, and academic success, it is reasonable to hypothesize that community is an important ingredient of successful learning in adult literacy education. The relationship between community and key instructional outcomes in adult literacy education needs to be ascertained through additional research. Assuming that community is indeed important, we need to train teachers to develop and maintain it. In our opinion, the place to start is with inclusion. We suspect that helping teachers understand that inclusion is important and equipping them with brief but effective inclusion activities to use with new learners could provide important gains with little expenditure of resources.

Shaping Factors

Enrollment Turbulence

Most of the classes we observed ran in cycles roughly equivalent to semesters. Classes were filled to capacity at the beginning of each cycle, but attrition took its toll on enrollment. To maintain adequate class size for funding and instructional purposes and to serve new learners seeking to enroll, learners were added to most classes on a continuous basis. Regardless of their skill levels, new learners were typically slotted into any class with available seats. Consequently, it was very difficult for most programs to group learners by skill level. The result was classes with both mixed skill levels and continuous enrollment.

Teachers who had experience in K–12 systems—where the same students are present in June as in September, and where classes are grouped by skill level—were ill equipped to deal with this enrollment turbulence. In classes that had learners with very mixed skill levels and a group format, it was difficult for teachers to target instruction at an appropriate level. If teachers targeted instruction at the GED level, lower-level learners were sometimes left in the dark. If they targeted instruction at lower levels, upper-level learners sometimes became bored.

In classes in which individualized instruction was used to address mixed skill levels, it was often difficult for teachers to help learners when needed. When this help was not provided, learning became stalled.

Continuous enrollment made it difficult to create a sense of community because class membership was always in flux. It also made it difficult for teachers to use complex teaching methods, such as project-based learning or peer coaching, because the membership of learner work groups was so unstable.

Based on everything we have observed, continuous enrollment and mixed skill levels are two of the most serious and understated problems facing adult literacy education today. In fact, we are concerned that a very dangerous cycle may be at work: High learner attrition breeds classes with continuous enrollment and mixed skill levels, reducing the effectiveness of instruction and, in turn, contributing to high learner attrition.

Implications

Continuous enrollment and, to some extent, classes with mixed skill levels are products of high dropout rates. As it is unreasonable to expect that the dropout problem will be solved either soon or easily, calls to end continuous enrollment and mixed levels are probably not feasible. Better ways to manage continuous enrollment and mixed levels are possible, however. First, a systematic search for the best practices in managing continuous enrollment and mixed skill levels should be made. After these practices have been evaluated for efficacy and feasibility, they should be disseminated to teachers and program administrators through professional development and other means. Dealing more effectively with continuous enrollment and mixed skill levels is achievable, and doing so would have a very significant positive impact on adult learning experiences.

Funding Pressure

Funding pressure affects what happens in adult literacy classrooms in at least two ways. First, funding source regulations and eligibility requirements often determine what kind of learners will be served, the type of instruction they receive, and how long they can stay. Second, the amount of funding affects such things as hours of available instruction and class size. In one class we observed, funding source regulations restricted learners to 12 weeks of instruction. After that time, learners were not allowed to participate in the program, regardless of whether they had achieved their learning goals. We observed classes that had become dysfunctional because of reduced funding. In one underfunded class, 40 learners were present, and some could not find seats. Several of the welfare-sponsored classes we visited had lost substantial enrollments because of welfare reform.

Implications

It is easy to say we need more funding for adult literacy because we clearly do. However, when we look at how funding affects instruction, it is clear that how funds are allocated is as severe a problem as the amount of funds available. Differing eligibility requirements and regulations for programs funded under the Adult and Family Literacy Act, welfare, and Department of Labor programs create fragmentation at the local level that ill serves learners. Although the WIA is designed to address some of the allocation problems, it can only do so if adult educators at the local level participate substantially in the decision-making processes WIA establishes. We need to make funding-related challenges known and see that they are acted upon at the state and national policy levels.

Professional Development

Instruction is the most fundamental process of adult literacy education, and the classroom is the most basic organizational unit. For this reason, efforts to improve the quality of adult literacy have to focus on instruction and classroom behavior. When all means of improving instruction quality are considered, professional development stands out as the most important. At the state level, development of comprehensive, well-planned professional development systems is vital. This requires leadership, strategic planning, and resources.

In the Adult Education Act as amended by the National Literacy Act of 1991, 10 percent of a state's grant was mandated for professional development. Another 5 percent was mandated for professional development, special demonstration projects, or both. In short, professional development was a mandated activity. Under the 1998 Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, Title II of WIA, 12.5 percent of the state allotment *may* be used for leadership activities, including professional development. Expenditures for professional development are permitted but not required.¹ If professional development is to receive the resources it needs, the law needs to be changed to make staff development a mandated function once again and to increase funds available for it.

¹ (<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OVAE/AdultEd/InfoBoard/legis.html>).

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