

Toward a New Pluralism in ABE/ESOL Programs: Teaching to Multiple “Cultures of Mind”

A NCSALL Research Brief

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In much research, learners’ perspectives tend to be considered in light of a program’s expectations or U.S. society’s definitions of learner needs, rather than considering how learners would define and make sense of their own experiences, hopes, and needs. In contrast, this study considers learners’ meanings as the fundamental starting point for exploration.

As adult developmental psychologists interested in adult education, we followed for a year or more the experiences of learning and change of 41 adult learners enrolled in three distinct programs—at a community college, a family literacy site, and a workplace—intended to enhance their English language fluency, content knowledge, and effectiveness in their roles as students, parents, or workers. Some learners were enrolled in pre-GED classes, and others were in an adult diploma program. We selected programs that were longer term because we wanted to examine the developmental dimensions of transformational learning. We also looked for programs that intentionally incorporated a variety of supports and challenges to facilitate adult learning, including, for example, tutoring, advising, and technological support. Our purposes were to gain a better understanding of how these adults perceived program learning; how, if at all, program learning helped them enact a particular social role; and how, if at all, these adults changed while participating in the program.

A Developmental Perspective on Adulthood

Our research approach derived from a 30-year theoretical and methodological tradition that closely follows the development of individuals’ ways of making sense of their inner and outer experience. We refer to this perspective as “constructive-developmental” because it considers the way a person constructs his or her reality—or experience—and how the way a person makes meaning of experience can change or develop over time. A person’s meaning system is an interpretive lens through which experience is understood. This lens filters the way people take in, organize, and understand their experiences and represents their way of knowing. Depending on available supports, scaffolding, appropriate developmental challenges, and encouragement of growth, adults can gradually grow from a simpler way of knowing to a more complex one.

Key Findings

- ♦ Adult learners’ ways of knowing can change significantly, even over a short period of time.
- ♦ Cohorts are important to both supporting and challenging adult learners.
- ♦ Differences in complexity of meaning systems are not highly associated with level of formal education.
- ♦ Developmental level shapes adult learners’ choices, preferences, and experience of program learning.

Implications for Practice

- ♦ Teachers and program developers should be prepared to engage developmentally diverse learners.
- ♦ Awareness of meaning systems can inform teachers’ expectations of learners.
- ♦ Teachers should use a range of pedagogical approaches to collaboration.

Implication for Policy

- ♦ Program designs that bring learning groups together at the same time, preserve the group’s continuity, and have a common goal appear advantageous.

Implication for Research

- ♦ Research regarding ABE teachers’ ways of knowing would be beneficial.

Significant Change is Possible

Study participants changed in at least three important ways: informative, transformative, and acculturation. They all sought new kinds of information, skills, and ideas throughout the course of their programs. We refer to these as informative changes. Often, these changes contributed to extending learners’ ideas and values

within their existing ways of knowing. Some learners experienced transformational changes. They not only made gains in *what* they knew, but also modified *how* they knew, demonstrating new and more complex ways of knowing. That these shifts in participants' ways of knowing would occur even for a few learners over the short span of one year is remarkable. Most of the study participants at two of the three sites were immigrants to the United States who also underwent changes of acculturation, gaining fluency in English as well as fluency in a new culture. This study found that the ways they experienced and navigated these changes were related to their developmental position—that is, learners with different ways of knowing demonstrated notable differences in their descriptions of these changes.

The Cohort is Powerful

Being part of a “cohort”—a tight-knit, reliable, common-purpose group—was extraordinarily important to participants, in different ways, at all three sites. This finding challenges the longstanding view that adults, who often come to class with well-established social networks, are less in need of entrée to a new community than, for example, college-age adolescents. The cohort supported and challenged adult learners in their academic learning. It also served as a context in which learners provided each other emotional and psychological support. Lastly, the cohort challenged learners to broaden their perspectives. Both within and across sites, learners who shared a particular way of knowing demonstrated similar understanding of how the cohort and collaborative learning supported and challenged them.

Adult Learners Have Varied Meaning Systems

Although learners in any one of the three research settings were primarily of similar age and oriented to a common and particular social role (parent, worker, or student), there was a diversity in learners' ways of knowing. Moreover, these learners demonstrated a range of ways of knowing that was virtually identical to the range found in previous studies with samples of native English-speaking adults when those samples had participants with similarly wide-spread socioeconomic status. Therefore, learners in adult basic education (ABE) and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) programs should not be presumed to construct experience with less complexity than anyone else, and differences in complexity of learners' meaning systems are not highly associated with level of formal education.

Implications

These findings suggest that teachers and program developers might likely find and should be prepared to engage developmentally diverse populations within any ABE/ESOL classroom. Orienting to diversity of developmental level can provide insights into how learners make sense of their experiences and the ways that programs can respond to learners' strengths and needs. Awareness of different meaning systems can also inform educators' expectations of learners and improve the fit between learning challenge and learner capacity. Developmentally conscious educators may want to consider different ways learners can demonstrate competence and scrutinize the goals of their overall programs and individual lessons.

This study suggests that learning choices or preferences tend to be shaped by learners' developmental level. Depending on their way of knowing, some may be more responsive to a teacher-driven approach and others to a student-driven approach. We recommend that teachers incorporate diverse pedagogical approaches in their classroom practices to best attend to and support learners with different needs, preferences, and developmental orientations. Although it may not always be feasible because of budget constraints, there also appear to be distinct advantages when programs bring a learning group together at the same time, preserve the group's continuity by discouraging mid-course exits and entrances, have a common goal or outcome, and conclude together.

Researchers in the field are urged to expand on this work to also consider ABE teachers' ways of knowing. Active debates over directions for supporting teacher development, teacher socialization, and professionalism of the field would benefit from richer understanding of teachers' preferences for and understanding of their own learning.

For the executive summary or the full research monograph of the Adult Development Study, or to learn about other NCSALL efforts connecting research and practice to strengthen adult literacy education programs, visit <http://ncsall.gse.harvard.edu> to download a free electronic version, or contact NCSALL at (617) 482-9485 for a low-cost print version.

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