

Together We Learn: Collaboration and Adult Literacy Education

by Ralf St. Clair

In many ways the history of adult education is a story of collaboration. The main reason for this is probably one of the most obvious facts about adult education - there have been very few organizations completely dedicated to the education of adults. There have been a few notable exceptions, but generally adult education is supported by structures designed to do something else, and viewing the education of adults as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Adult literacy education in the US has been fortunate to have two major volunteer organizations - Literacy Volunteers of America and Laubach Literacy Action - committed solely to adult literacy, but collaboration is a much more common scenario.

In this short article I would like to identify some of the partners adult literacy and ESL education has danced with, and briefly describe the steps they took. My first hope is that this will be interesting, but my further hope is to inspire administrators, instructors, and learners to think constructively about some of the collaborative opportunities available. Collaboration is a powerful tool for your program, your learners, and your community.

Most likely you are already involved in collaboration to some degree. If your adult ESL program uses a church basement or a corner in the local library you are collaborating. If a local supermarket lets you walk around their shelves with your Even Start adults in order to learn about comparison-shopping you are collaborating. However, making collaboration a central pillar of your program involves getting those people interested enough in your work to attend board meetings, learn what adult literacy is all about, and commit to working with you to build services for learners.

Many different organizations have taken this step over the years, including:

Churches. In ancient, medieval, and contemporary Europe religious organizations have provided a great deal of adult literacy education. In Scandinavia, this was because the local brand of Protestantism required members of the faith to be able to read the bible. Interestingly, the literacy education in this context was entirely concerned with reading - learners were not taught how to write. The focus was entirely on understanding the word of God, not on creating your own word. Nonetheless, the education provided a critical contribution to the status of Scandinavian countries as among the best educated in the world.

Overall, it is hard to see how any kind of adult education could exist without the historical support of religious organizations. In the US and Canada, churches have maintained the tradition of support for literacy education, albeit with a lower profile. Rather than directly providing literacy education for adults, churches often supply facilities to local programs, saving the programs a great deal of money and trouble, and allowing them to be situated in areas where many potential learners can be found.

Universities and Colleges. While post-secondary education may not spring to mind as

an obvious partner in adult education, these organizations have a strong history of involvement. One of the best examples is the Settlement House movement, an idea imported from the UK to North America during the 19th century. Settlement Houses involve groups of students living together in the community and providing accessible education services to the people in the neighborhood. The term itself is rather old-fashioned, and they are now sometimes called Neighborhood Houses or something similar. Many colleges have also followed this kind of model, providing local adult literacy and ESL services for local people. One well-known Canadian program is offered in Downtown Eastside Vancouver (the poorest area in Canada) by Capilano Community College. The program is situated in a historic Carnegie library saved from demolition by a coalition of local residents. This kind of provision pulls together adult education and community development, and is often very effective at attracting and retaining learners.

One example of a university-based collaboration is Universidad Popular (UP) in Chicago. Established thirty years ago largely through the efforts of community activist and academic Tom Heaney, UP is situated in Humboldt Park, a predominantly Hispanic and economically challenged area of the city. Heaney brought together the resources of the City of Chicago, local universities, and the community themselves to create an organization which specialized in EL/ Civics long before the term was coined.

Libraries. Over the last hundred years or so, libraries have been wonderful allies to adult literacy educators. In 2002, the American Library Association endorsed literacy as one of the areas of endeavor for libraries to pursue in the future. The provision of libraries ranges from a room for a couple of hours a week to a group of dedicated staff. In most cases, libraries will stock adult reading materials at a variety of reading and English language proficiency levels. The contributions of libraries have been recognized on an international level as well, with UNESCO identifying them as a critical component of the adult literacy network in developing countries.

Schools. It may seem peculiar to see schools on this list, but it should be remembered that the primary business of schools is to work with children - when they get involved with adults they are usually collaborating with adult education specialists. The history of school provision is an interesting one, and I always think about the early teachers of adults with a great deal of respect. Due to school regulations, teachers were almost always female and had to be unmarried. These single women, often based in small prairie towns far from their family, would organize evening classes for adults. This would involve overcoming all sorts of barriers - including weather, resentment, and scorn - to assist adults to develop the skills these teachers believed they had the right to know.

In recent years collaboration with schools has been a bit of a two-edged sword. Schools have resources adult educators can only dream of, but they also have set ways of thinking about education that are not always compatible with the philosophies of adult educators. For example, educators of adults often use very eclectic methods - a few ideas from here, another few from there - and put them together into a package that works for them and a specific group of learners. School teachers are often trained in a more linear fashion - phonics and then whole language, for example. Another significant difference is that educators of adults often use the personal and diverse experience of learners as a central component of

curriculum, whereas schoolteachers usually have to follow pre-formed textbooks and other materials.

Unions. There are two educational audiences for unions - members and non-members. Traditionally they have provided services to members and nobody else, but in recent years there has been a trend to extend their services to non-members. Partly, this is a response to falling membership and the need to create positive publicity, but an equally strong motive has been the realization that unions have a great deal of educational expertise to share. Unions collaborate with colleges and non-profit organizations to provide these services, which are often of very high quality.

Business. The obvious role for business is to sponsor adult literacy and ESL education, such as in the highly visible case of Verizon and the recent efforts by Wal-Mart. However, they can do a lot more. The strongest example is workplace literacy programs, where literacy or ESL education is provided to the employees of a specific organization. Hospitals are sometimes partners in this kind of program, but there is no reason why any business would not be a suitable candidate. A common model is to have classes where half the time is paid by the employer and the other half is volunteered by the employee. So if the learner attends 6 hours per week, 3 hours is paid. This is a good deal for the employee and a strong incentive to attend. The employing organization benefits from the increased productivity of a better-educated workforce, the members of which are often more committed to the company. They can see that the employer is prepared to help them learn, and that means a lot to employees irrespective of their level of education!

Service Organizations. The work of the Kiwanis, Lions, Rotary, and especially the Scottish Rite Masons cannot be overlooked. Each of these organizations has shown support for literacy work in different ways, with the Masons having had the most impact. They have developed curriculum and materials for use in adult literacy, which have proven to be popular and effective in many areas.

Social Service Agencies. The final area I will talk about is social service agencies. Since the passing of the Workforce Investment Act, thousands of agencies provide education to unemployed people combining basic skills and ESL with job specific training. This is a whole new context for adult literacy education - learners are required to be there, the outcome is often linked to a specific job, and continued education may or may not be an acceptable goal. Despite these differences this provision offers many opportunities to engage learners with the process of education in a positive, and hopefully long-lasting, way.

Building Collaboration

So what do you do if you are now convinced that collaboration is both desirable and worthwhile? First of all, learn some more about it. There are many resources available, and TCALL can help you to find some relevant to your situation. Recognize that collaboration, in the best sense, will involve giving up some control of your program. Know what the pitfalls are, and think about how to avoid them. For example, the local grocery store will provide you with a room and help you build a library, but mandates that you promote their products - what do you do? When you feel that you have a sense of where you want to go, and what is acceptable as a

route to get there, you can begin to think about likely partners.

While national collaborations attract publicity, for most programs a local collaboration is both more realistic and more useful. Local organizations are more likely to care enough about your community to want to invest time, resources and money in your program. Be clear about what kind of collaboration you want to set up - is it a straight sponsorship deal, or do you want the library to become a full partner in your program? If you have nothing in mind when you start, you are likely to get it.

People often talk as if collaboration is a new thing in adult literacy education, made necessary by shrinking resources. What I have suggested here is that collaboration is a long established principle of adult education, a central component of our vocation. Collaboration adds value to what we do in so many senses, and is not as hard as the word can make us think. Collaboration can be informal, formal, legal, friendly, controlling, or casual - the point is that you decide. The benefits are enormous and multifaceted - for learners, who see that many people are behind their learning; for programs, who can leverage their resources and serve more people; and for the collaborators, who get to learn about our field and participate in programs that make a real difference to real lives. Together we all can learn how powerful literacy education can be.

About the Author

Dr. St.Clair is the Director of the Texas Center for Adult Literacy and Learning (TCALL). Born in Glasgow, he has come to Texas from Scotland via Canada, so brings significant international experience in adult education and literacy. He received his doctorate from the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada and has been working in adult education for almost twenty years. He is also an Assistant Professor in EAHRD, with research interests in adult and family literacy and curriculum studies. Ralf and partner Jenny believe that the most effective teacher they have ever met is their 18 month old son Grant.

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