

The Post-Industrial Future and the Origins of Competency-Based Adult Basic Education in Connecticut: A Critical Perspective

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Abstract

This essay analyzes a major policy paper of the Connecticut Department of Education linking adult basic education with the need to equip potential employees with an increasingly complex set of "basic skills" in order to assure the state a well-qualified workforce in a "post-industrial" economy. This effort is prefaced by a brief historical overview of functional literacy since the 1930s. This essay calls for a broadened adult basic education curriculum linking instrumental knowledge with autobiographical insight and meaningful socio-cultural knowledge through a collaborative methodology where students learn from each other as well as from the instructor. The essay is a case study of more pervasive tensions between policy formulations and the research perspectives of the New Literacy Studies.

The *Workforce 2000* report indicates that 35 million Americans will have to improve their abilities if we are to meet the labor needs of the year 2000. The 15 to 20 million people, or more, who have severe basic skills problems are those who must improve their abilities the most. Unless *we* take steps to upgrade *their* (emphasis added) skills in the very near future, all of us will be worse off. Our rate of economic growth will stagnate, welfare costs will escalate, foreign competition will make more rapid inroads, and our national standard of living will fall (or at least it will not keep pace with increased standards of living elsewhere in the world). (Chisman, 190. pp. 8-9)

The concept of functional literacy should be laid to rest. The concept is flawed: Its definition is arbitrary, its measurement is problematic, and the phenomenon of "functioning in life" cannot readily be equated with literacy. Adults with limited literacy skills should be credited with the skills and knowledge that they do have. Educators should start to build on and extend this knowledge and skill, based on the needs, desires, and interests of adult learners, rather than dwelling on measuring how "functional" a learner is or needs to become, according to standardized tests" (Merrifield, Bingman, Hemphill, and Bennett deMarrais, 1997, p. 213).

Functional Literacy

According to various studies (Ehringhaus, 1990, p. 187; Stedman and Kaestle, 1987, p. 23), the term “functional literacy” first appeared in the 1930s with Franklin D. Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps. Early definitions linked functionality with a certain grade level attainment which stood as shorthand, according to proponents, for the skills required to function minimally in a complex, industrial, print-based society (Stedman and Castle, 1987, p. 23). “Although it was impossible to define illiteracy for an *individual* (emphasis added) in terms of grade completion,” proponents believed that it “was possible to use it as a general indicator for large populations” (Cook, 1977, p. 51). As the perceived literacy demands of society became increasingly complex through the mid-twentieth century, various advocates of functional literacy raised the threshold of grade level attainment. In 1947 “[a] functional illiterate was [deemed as] one who had completed fewer than five years of elementary school (Cook, 1977, p. 51). In the 1950s and 60s, the standard was raised, linking the concept of functional literacy to seventh or eighth grade school completion (Cook, 1977, p. 82; Stedman and Kaestle, 1987, p. 23). While definitional clarity between grade level achievement and the perceived minimal functional literacy demands of a complex industrial society remained imprecise between the 1940s to the early 1970s, proponents assumed a general correlation. After World War II, the emerging definition of functional literacy sharpened when the United Nations and other western dominated agencies linked literacy as one important variable in raising the evolutionary threshold of industrial capacity in the “underdeveloped world” toward the path of “modernization” (Street, 1988, Graff, 1987).

By the 1960s, both at home and abroad, the promotion of literacy by policymakers was linked in some compelling ways to the on-going development of corporate capitalism and sometimes touted as a means of enhancing liberal democracy (Graff, 1987, p. 53). To the proponents of John F. Kennedy's New Frontier, liberal democracy, corporate capitalism, and technology represented the underpinnings of a

rational world view through which complex social problems at home and abroad would become mitigated, although hardly resolved in the realpolitik Cold War atmosphere of the early 1960s. It is difficult to deny an idealistic strain in Kennedy's vision of the New Frontier, which led to the War on Poverty and the Peace Corps. Yet a more technocratic persuasion was also pervasive among the "best and the brightest" (Halberstam, 1972) which was reflected in the Manpower Development and Training Act (MDTA) of 1962 which linked the new construct of "adult basic education" to that of employability (Cook, 1977, p.83; Quigley, 1997, pp. 85-86). With the passage of this legislation, "[t]he issue of illiteracy was discovered anew. However, it was not illiteracy but adult basic education that was now prescribed for those who fell below requisite [employment] training levels" (Quigley, 1997, p. 86). By subsuming ABE as a form of human capital development, a trend implicit in federal literacy campaigns since the 1930s, "[h]umanistic responses to learner needs have [had] little role in serious policy formulation" (Quigley, 1997, p. 88).

The APL Study (1975)

The 1975, Texas-based Adult Performance Level (APL) study, sponsored by the U.S. Office of Education brought considerable clarity to definitions of functional literacy through an identification of a specific set of utilitarian, "survival" skills in the areas of consumer economics, occupational knowledge, health, government and law, and community resources (Delker, 1983; Lankshear, 1993, Stedman and Kaestle, 1987, pp. 24-26; Sticht, McDonald, and Erickson, 1998, pp. 87-88). This functional focus displaced the criteria of grade level attainment and a school-based curriculum for adult literacy and basic education. The five content areas were segmented into 65 "detailed empirical objectives" (Lankshear, 1993, p. 93). Although the APL study did not provide examples of "situation-specific" (p. 94) tasks, the competency-based initiatives that germinated from the APL study would do so in abundance. The *Connecticut Competency*

System Life Skill Competencies (1996, p. 3), for example under the objective, “Use postal services,” within the general category “community resources,” included the following specific tasks:

- 2.4.1 Address letters and envelopes
- 2.4.2 Interpret postal rates and types of mailing services
- 2.4.3 Interpret postal service forms and instructions on returned mail
- 2.4.1 Purchase stamps and other postal items and services

For its proponents, the APL study represented a major advance over grade school definitions of literacy by identifying highly concrete and highly specific functional skills.

Yet critics contend that its benefits have not been born without a cost.

According to several scholars, the APL study is flawed in fundamental ways. In terms of design, only a small number of those attending ABE classes were sampled based only on some highly restrictive criteria. The study only focused on learning outcomes that measured:

external skills as opposed to less quantifiable objectives as growth in areas that provide personal satisfaction. The excluded objectives include stimulation of imagination, sharpening and extending memory, reflecting on one's place in the world, learning to undertake change in oneself and the world, cultivating skills in interpersonal relations, and expressing creativity (Hunter and Harman, 1985, p. 18).

The National Institute of Education charged that:

As a scientific inquiry, the APL study was very weak. Even if we put aside doubts about the existence of a general construct of “adult competence,” the much publicized findings that 20 percent of American adults are “functionally incompetent” on the basis of the design, conduct and reporting of the APL study is altogether untenable (U.S. Department of Education, 1980, p. 69, cited in Sticht, McDonald, and Erickson, 1998, p. 88).

Dropouts and those never attending, whom Quigley refers to as “resisters,” admittedly, a hard group to reach, were not consulted (Quigley, 1990: Hunter and Harman, 1985, p. 18). Lankshear (1993, p. 94) expresses concern that the APL study primarily reflects:

...a negative state-avoiding failure to cope-rather than any optimal achievement, or a positive expression of human capacities. It is, moreover, passive. Functional literacy equips the person to respond to outside demands and standards, to understand and follow. There is no suggestion here of leading, commanding, mastering, or controlling.

Lankshear's harsh picture of the APL study is perhaps overdrawn, although his critique is supported by the more "moderate" perspectives of Hunter and Harman and Sticht, McDonald and Erickson. The APL study did, after all, play a major definitional role in sharpening the utilitarian definition of functional literacy or more precisely, "functional competency" (Sticht, McDonald, and Erickson, 1998, p. 87) compared to the more generalized criteria of grade school attainment. However, its most pervasive assumption, the "deficiency" perspective of adult literacy students in need of "survival" skills, has been severely critiqued.

Notwithstanding these concerns, the APL study served as a "foundational" document that undergirded the competency-based approaches to ABE that flourished in the 1980s, particularly in California with the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) and in Connecticut with the Connecticut Adult Performance Program (CAPP) required of all state and federally funded programs in Connecticut as of 1990. This essay will focus on the major policy study that led to the adaptation of CAPP, which sought to reconstruct adult education in the state to meet the demands of a post-industrial society. As such, it serves as a case study of a broader national policy trend linking adult literacy to the needs of the global economy (Chisman, 1989, 1990) and raises important issues on the nature and purpose of adult literacy education.

Looking To The 21st Century: A Strategic Plan For Adult Education

The specter of economic decline, the prospect of an emerging post-industrial society, the historic marginality of adult education, and a changing demographic workforce served as the rationale for the development of a competency-based CASAS

derived adult education system in Connecticut. In response to these challenges, in 1984, then Commissioner of Education, Gerald Tirozzi “presented Connecticut's Challenge: An Agenda for Educational Equity and Excellence to the State Board of Education” (Adult Education Study Committee (hereafter, AESC), 1985, p. 2). As part of that report, the Board identified three areas for adult education: (a) adult basic literacy, (b) adult occupational skill training, and (c) adult retraining (AESC, 1985, p. 2).

The Board appointed the AESC consisting of state and community leaders in the areas of business, government, labor and volunteer organizations, which recommended “a series of important steps to be taken to help meet adult education needs by the year 2000” (AESC, 1985, p. 2).

In a document, peppered by graphs, charts and statistics, the AESC laid out the problems facing the state of Connecticut and the challenges it presented for adult basic education (ABE). Specifically:

The State's prosperity depends on a strong economy and the availability of a work force with strong academic basic skills. Connecticut's changing demographics say (sic) that the major sources of the labor pool will be adults needing retraining or adults and out-of-school youth whose lack of basic educational skills now make them unemployable (AESC, 1985, p. 1).

The AESC organized its findings around various external and internal issues that provided the basis for its recommendations. External factors included: “(a) demographic trends, (b) societal forces, (c) state and national economy, (d) technology, (e) federal regulations, and (f) societal changes” (AESC, 1985, p. 4). Internal (to the department of education and state of Connecticut) factors included: “(a) performance in reaching target populations, (b) organizational structure and management skills (of ABE programs), (c), state regulations, and (d) funding levels” (AESC, 1985, p. 4). I will draw out some of these factors in the following brief summary of the report.

External Factors

Like a national report written several years after *Looking to the 21st Century*, the AESC deemed it essential that Connecticut “avoid (an)...unhappy rendezvous with demographic destiny” (Chisman, 1989, p. 3). The AESC identified the problem as two-fold: the graying of the workforce to the year 2000 due to a relative decrease in the 16-24 year old population and the projected increase of minority populations, including women, with limited educational attainments (AESC, 1985, pp. 6-11) to meet the needs of an increasingly complex economy. The challenge for the AESC appeared clear:

The reality of an aging labor force and significant increases in populations with *urgent* (emphasis added) educational needs signal a major policy decision for the Connecticut State Board of Education regarding the department's role in adult education for the next 15 years. The complexities of survival in an environment characterized primarily by change will require that all undereducated adults be provided learning opportunities, which enable them to adjust. Added demands for basic skills education and training services will strain the resources of the current system (AESC, 1985, p. 11).

The AESC linked economic issues to the emergence of the “Information Society” and the need to develop in the workforce, “competencies in areas of technical, interpersonal, and basic communication skills” (AESC, 1985, p. 13). As the authors to the report's appendix put it, “a paradigm shift from an industrial age society to an information age society” (Mullarney and Lewis, 1984, p. A-5) was on the horizon with profound implications for work, social relationships and even individual identity.

Internal Issues

The challenges for adult education seemed clear to the AESC:

State adult education programs will be challenged significantly to provide programs that will maintain a competent workforce (original emphasis), as well as help employers remain competitive in response to constant technological changes (AESC, 1985, p. 16).

In order to accomplish this, programs will have to:

expand their notion of “basic skills” beyond the traditional areas of reading, mathematics, and language proficiency. As we move toward the 21st century, basic skills will include concepts of problem solving, abstract thinking, and ability to react to change. The computer revolution will offer new tools for learning which program staff will learn to use and make available to students. Basic skills programs must be able to help students move into jobs or higher level training programs (AESC, 1985, p. 16).

To prepare Connecticut's workforce for the post-industrial society, the AESC recommended an overhaul of the state's adult education system, especially over “program resources, state funding, specific policies and regulations” (AESC, 1985, p. 16). To achieve its goals, it was important for the various programs to reach the “approximately 600,000 adults aged 20 and over without a high school diploma.” The “estimated 23,700 youth, primarily urban (and minority), aged 16-19 who have left school,” as well as those graduates who nonetheless remained “deficient in basic literacy and academic skills” (AESC, 1985, p. 17) would also serve as a target focus for an ABE system in the state. This system would be revised along the functional lines described above in contradistinction to a diffusive basic skills approach pervasive throughout much of the state-mandated programs, with their typically strong reliance on decontextual textbooks.

Recommendations

The Study Committee unequivocally articulated its “post-industrial” vision:

The policy and commitment of the State Board with regard to adult education should be radically updated and intensified to reflect the changing realities of society as it moves toward the 21st century (Original emphasis, AESC, 1985, p. 30).

Specifically, “The State Board of Education must assume a conscious position of leadership with regard to adult education in Connecticut” (AESC, 1985, p. 31).

Leadership tasks included making basic and vocational skills a priority, improving program quality, and establishing standards of performance. The AESC also stressed state leadership in assisting local agencies and programs identify “undereducated adults” and helping them to gear their programs toward job development (AESC, 1985, p. 31).

The AESC made a variety of other recommendations, but for the purposes of this essay, the following is the most critical: “Assure that by 1990 all adult basic skills programs (supported with state or federal funds) are competency based” (AESC, 1985, p. 36). The AESC provided the following definition:

Competency based education is a complicated process, but it recognizes the fact that learning must take place and be assessed in terms of its utility in the real world. Adults learn for pragmatic reasons; good programming, therefore, should be designed to reflect this fact (AESC, 1985, p. 35).

The AESC concluded by calling on the State Board of Education to take “aggressive leadership,” p. 43) to meet the needs and challenges of Connecticut’s adult education system on the eve of the Post-Industrial Revolution. In its focus on preparing an “undereducated” workforce to meet the informational demands of the global economy, *Looking To The 21st Century* prefigured Forrest P. Chisman’s *Jump Start* (which significantly influenced the passage of the National Literacy Act of 1991) by five years.

A Post-Industrial Vision and the Lived Realities of Adult Literacy Learners

The appendix of *Looking To The 21st Century* includes an essay written by two University of Connecticut Adult Education Professors titled “*Resolving the Dilemma—Where Do We Go From Here?*” (Mullarney and Lewis, 1984). Like the main document, the essay stressed the need to equip Connecticut’s workforce for “the world of tomorrow” (Mullarney and Lewis, 1984, p. A-12). Notwithstanding Mullarney and Lewis’s upbeat description of the emerging post-industrial society, based largely on the futurology of John Naisbitt (1984), is their ominous prognosis for the then *current* crop of ABE students whom “we might have to bypass... [in order] to implement the new education.” Specifically:

we are trying to give thousands of adults some basic skills in Adult Basic Education programs. When these people graduate, they will still be lacking in the ability to function in the new society as it will have progressed faster in skill demands than the students acquired them. The situation is even worse for

teenagers and minorities. These people will continue to comprise a sizable portion of new labor force entrants by the end of the decade. Women also place new demands on the system. Therefore, it may be necessary to help these people, today, *function* but place the *main* focus (emphases added) on the elementary and secondary school youth while preparing for the new lifelong learning adult of tomorrow (Mullarney and Lewis, 1984, p. A-10).

Mullarney and Lewis contended that the “real” purpose of any proposed transformation of ABE was to establish a system for a new set of adult learners who will have been socialized in the post-industrial new world order, essentially, for the period *beyond* the year 2000. Whether or not this also represented the explicit view of the Connecticut Bureau of Adult Education, at the least, it places in question the Study Committee's stated objective of “reaching those in [then current] need of basic skills training” (original emphasis), the “approximately 600,000 adults aged 20 and over without a high school diploma” (AESC, 1985, p. 17). Leaving motivation and intent aside, the rest of this section focuses on the extent to which the then *current* group of ABE students were equipped to enter high-tech vocations; the stated objective of *Looking To The 21st Century*.

As this essay has made abundantly clear, the AESC's dominant rationale for overhauling ABE along functional lines was to prepare “undereducated” adults, including growing numbers of minorities and women, for the increasingly complex high tech jobs that would prevail in Connecticut as the economy shifted from an industrial to a post-industrial base. Yet the major economic problem in Connecticut during the 1990s was not the inadequacy of a trained workforce, but a significant “downsizing” of the economy. According to a local television editorial based upon statistics supplied by the Connecticut Department of Labor, the state had lost between 160,000 and 200,000 jobs during the early 1990s due to downsizing (WFSB News Broadcast, April 22, 1994). In terms of absolute annual averages; finance, insurance, and real estate jobs dropped from 152,000 in 1988 to 130,200 in 1996 or a decline of almost 14.2% (Connecticut Department of Labor, 1999). Tens of thousands of highly competent and literate

technicians, managers, computer operators, bank tellers, and filing clerks lost their jobs. The problem in the Connecticut economy, therefore, was not the lack of a competent workforce to meet the high-tech needs of “tomorrow,” but restricting employment opportunities even for the highly educated through the cutback of post-industrial jobs.

It might be argued that the economic malaise in Connecticut during the first-half of the 1990s was merely a temporary glitch and that in the long term a high tech revival will require the well-trained competent workforce that the AESC initially prognosed for the 1990s. Even if accurate, that leaves two problems; first, the morality of “bypass[ing] a total generation to implement the new education” (Mullarney and Lewis, 1984, p. A-10), and second, whether or not ABE students exclusive of those at the GED level in statistically significant numbers can develop the literacy competencies to “function proficiently” in entry-level jobs in banking, insurance or other “high-tech” fields. I will leave the former to the value system of the reader and concentrate on the latter.

Adult literacy and ABE serve a broad constituency, from the seventeen-year-old recent high-school urban dropout to the 65-year-old grandmother who has finally found the time to begin to learn to read. Those in their 30s, 40s and 50s often have different learning objectives than other age cohorts. Many of those who are employed are not seeking high tech jobs, but rather, slight advancements in their current jobs or new employment that requires some skill increase in what they currently possess, but nothing like the envisioned jobs described in *Looking To The 21st Century* (Lestz, Demetron, and Smith, 1994; Demetron, 1994; Fingeret and Danin (1991).

Consider David, who was born in Guyana and migrated to the United States at age 19. David turned down a new position at the supermarket where he worked because he could not read the meat labels on the truck (Smith, Ball, Demetron and Michelson, 1993, 23). Eventually, he gained mastery of such tasks and has moved on to employment in a meatpacking company. David worked on his basic literacy skills for four years and progressed a great deal. It is conceivable that he may eventually develop the aptitude to

possess a high-tech job, assuming that is what he wants, but to gear adult literacy and ABE to such a restrictive outcome is to marginalize people like David who benefit greatly from such programs when they resonate with their *developmental* needs and intrinsic sources of motivation (Smith et.al., 1993, pp. 14-24; Demetron, 1994, pp. 25-31).

The example of David can be multiplied many fold from the sources cited and others which demonstrate the broad variability of motive and aptitude among adult learners, and the significance of culture and life-cycle development even on the very specific issue of vocational development. At the Bob Steele Reading Center in Hartford, Connecticut, the program I managed for a number of years, notable successes included learners who had gone on to nurse's aide training courses, auto body schools, and higher levels of adult education. Other successful outcomes included increased proficiency in current jobs and often, simply finding work.

Fingeret and Danin (1991) demonstrate similar findings. They conclude that "Since students' skills remain relatively low in relationship to demands of higher level jobs, most of the impact [of literacy development] has to do with small tasks, such as reading labels or street signs, and with a new sense of competence and confidence" (1991, p. 134). Adult learners at the basic literacy level sometimes improve their vocational status through literacy development either through finding employment, performing more effectively at current jobs, or in obtaining new positions that draw on new skills and aptitudes. Such changes often prove important in enhancing self-esteem and can result in the improvement a new reader's financial status, however marginally so, at least to the outside observer. Still, emerging literacy learners usually obtain positions which require little, or none of the technological sophistication identified in *Looking To The 21st Century* (Fingeret and Drennon, 1997; Merrifield et.al. 1997). This is not meant to repudiate the importance of technological competency for adult literacy learners. Significant longitudinal data is still lacking that would trace learner development over an

extensive time period that might disclose higher levels of vocational mobility. Moreover, learners at more advanced literacy levels are more likely to develop skills for high-tech jobs than more basic learners.

Statistics from Connecticut's Bureau of Adult Education are not overly optimistic about much of a direct correlation between ABE learning and the high-tech scenario promoted in the post-industrial vision of adult literacy. Notwithstanding the initial optimism in Connecticut about the transformative potential of competency based education in preparing an "undereducated" workforce for the post-industrial economy, the final report of CAPP documents only modest student goal achievements after several years of statewide program implementation. For example, the report states that "basic skill" development measured by standardized tests, "has held constant since the implementation of CAPP" (Alamprese, 1993, p. 29). On "competencies" achieved for "CAPP-Tested Students 1987-1991," slightly over 1% entered job training, an average of about 3% "got a job or a better job," and approximately 4.5% "entered other basic skills or secondary education program" (Alamprese, 1993, p. 32).

Because the evaluation mechanisms are statistically based, they do not disclose anything of the qualitative nature of these modest achievements, including the types of jobs obtained, the relationship between literacy development and vocational aptitude, or the personal significance that students attribute to their learning. Based upon the post-industrial vision which sparked the competency based education impetus in Connecticut, these outcomes at best are inconclusive in demonstrating any direct relationship between adult basic education and the alleged workforce needs of a "high-tech" economy.

The point is not to deny a connection, but to insist that the relationship between ABE and vocational development is more nuanced than articulated in *Looking To The 21st Century*. It is also to point out, as the downsizing has demonstrated, that the dilemmas facing the Connecticut economy extend well beyond the lack of a trained workforce, which *could* lead the Connecticut ABE system to foster a more complex

curriculum for vocational education. Such a program emphasis would help learners link interests and aptitudes to employment options available in the economy, both to meet their current needs and to assist them in longer term career and life planning as suggested, for example in the National Institute for Literacy's (NIFL) *Equipped for the Future* Worker Role Map (Stein, 1997, p. 16). Even as it sought to meet the array of human resource needs of the state economy, which adult basic education can, at best, only marginally fill, this proposed curriculum reconstruction would seek resonance with the autobiographical experiences of learners within their varied personal and social constructs. In short, it would support *their* efforts through career planning to find stable and meaningful employment as part of a broader life plan that would include work in family and civic literacy as well as in the realm of personal development (Stein, 1997).

In more recent years, the CT Bureau has turned from the “utopian” post-industrial imagery of *Looking To The 21st Century* in providing the state with “high-tech” human resource capital and is currently more concerned with initiatives like “school to work” and “welfare reform.” The focus is no longer on preparing students for the “world of tomorrow,” but for the more pedestrian world of work for predominantly low-tech jobs. The state’s CASAS driven “competency-based” education plan remains in place that has a broader focus than occupational objectives, although is clearly life-skill oriented as depicted in the many “tasks” as listed in its three digit performance indicators. Even as the Bureau has supported family literacy and ESL basic skills, the change in its designation from the CT Bureau of Adult Education to the CT Bureau of Career and Adult Education is telling of a pervasive “school to work” ideology that underlies state-based adult education in Connecticut. Hence, the legacy of *Looking To The 21st Century* minus its utopian imagery continues unabated in the transition from the Brave New World of 1984 to the new millennium, which is now upon us. The human capital development focus implicit in federally-sponsored literacy initiatives since the 1930s and intensified with the passage of the Manpower Development Training Act of 1962

(Quigley, 1997), remains pervasive at century's end in Connecticut. Within the CT vision, authority resides within the text (the CASAS three digit performance indicators) rather than with the reader (the life experience or knowledge base of the students), or in the dynamic interaction between them. In this model, the "at risk" ABE student exhibits various "deficiencies" that the CASAS-driven competency-based program seeks to correct as measured by the three digit performance indicators.

In their critique of functional literacy Merrifield and her colleagues (Merrifield, et.al. 1997, p. 203) point to another model:

Literacy education traditionally focuses on the "gaps," on what people do not know and cannot do. Our profile suggests another approach—a focus on strengths. We argue for an approach to literacy education that assumes people with limited literacy are resourceful, capable, and experienced and have already learned much in their lives. Literacy programs could do much more to value learners, capitalize on their strengths, and expand what they know

In a vision that builds on strengths, the authors focus on "literacy as practices" wherein the significance of specific literacy "tasks," such as CASAS competencies are mediated through a range of concrete psychological and social contexts. From this view, what is important is not the mastery of an external canon (CASAS competencies), but the nature of the interaction between the reader and the text with literacy serving as an intervening variable for life enhancement, whether at home, at work, at church, in the community or in other self-defined significant settings. More fundamentally, as put by Patricia A. Graham:

Literacy enhances our humanity. If we are literate in late twentieth century America, we expand the ways in which we can learn, understand and appreciate the world around us. Through literacy we enlarge the range of vicarious experience, both through our command of written materials and through formulations of new ideas demanded by the rigors of reading, writing and speaking...To learn, to express, to decide and to do...together permit us to become more autonomous individuals, less circumscribed by the conditions of social class, sex, and ethnicity into which we are born" (cited in Harman, 1987, p. 92).

In the remainder of this essay, I argue for a more comprehensive vision of adult literacy education that takes into account instrumental values (already discussed) as identified in *Looking To The 21st Century* and CASAS, but also explores other key dimensions, starting from the premises of adult literacy learners rather than from the assumptions of policy elites. The following case study material draws from the Bob Steele Reading Center, a site-based program within Literacy Volunteers of Greater Hartford which serves as a counter-model to the competency-based vision of adult literacy and ABE promoted by the Bureau. The Reading Center program exemplifies key themes in the New Literacy Studies (Merrifield, 1998) which are ignored or marginalized in the Bureau's vision, grounded in the assumptions of *Looking To The 21st Century* and CASAS.

The View From a Program Perspective

Current studies on motivation and adult literacy confirm the importance of instrumental values (Beder and Valentine, 1990; Ziegahn, 1992; Demetron, 1994; Fingeret and Drennon, 1997; Merrifield, et.al., 1997, and Quigley, 1997). Concern over employment, entering more advanced educational programs, and “coping” more effectively with daily life situations serve as powerful reasons why adults seek basic literacy enhancement. Yet as all of these studies demonstrate, adult basic learners desire much more than the competency based agenda defined by the “life-skill” criteria of the APL study, CASAS, and the workplace emphasis of *Looking To The 21st Century*.
Autobiography

What the ethnographic literature, in particular, discloses, is the mediating factor of the self in determining the value of any “life-skill,” and more fundamentally, the importance of enhanced self-esteem as a foundational motivation in undertaking and

sustaining the trek toward advanced literacy. The centrality of self-concept is particularly drawn upon by Fingeret and Drennon (1997) in their image of a “spiral” to discuss the “iterative and dynamic process that occur at varying rates” (p. 65) among adults as they consider, and then cycle through a literacy program. “Prolonged tension” such as a sense of shame or inadequacy and a “turning point,” a particular crisis that requires some immediate resolution, represent the background stages that bring individuals to consider a literacy program, where they may engage in “problem solving and seeking educational opportunities” as a way to begin a process of self-reconstruction. Extensive program participation often leads to “changing relationships and changing practices” that result in a newer sense of a literate self-identity; one that can be somewhat tenuous, dependent upon the strength and support of the literacy community. The authors identify “intensive continuing interaction” as the final stage of the cycle where a literacy identity is sustained. From the perspective of Fingeret and Drennon what is important is not so much the attainment of literacy as an autonomous end, but a renewed sense of self-concept and competency to better master the challenges life presents. The measurement of success is highly particular and does not easily translate into quantifiable test score gradations, even with assessment instruments intended to measure life-skill achievements.

The potency of self-worth as a core source of motivation is eloquently attested through the profusion of autobiographical writing among adult literacy learners (Fingeret and Danin, 1991; Smith, 1991; Smith, Ball, Demetron and Michelson, 1993; Lestz, Demetron and Smith, 1994). Consider the following passage, which is illustrative of an entire genre of emerging literature among adult literacy learners:

One day I went to work. It was a new job. I was there for two weeks. So that day the boss called me into his office. He told me to sit down. He gave me a piece of paper. He told me to write a note because I needed a nametag. I was scared. I did not know what to do. I did not know how to write. So I got up and said I had to go to the bathroom. I left his office and went to the bathroom. I was

so mad at myself. I left the bathroom and went back to his office. He was not there. I took the paper to my office and wrote the note with my dictionary. Thanks to my tutor Tom I can write this essay (Smith, 1991, p. 64).

According to Fingeret and Drennon (1997) and others, an important outcome of adult literacy programs is to enable adult new readers to achieve such personal goals like the above which may have other, not easily measurable or directly correlative benefits as well. There is little in *Looking To The 21st Century* and CASAS that directly focuses on the enhancement of self-esteem even though the ethnographic literature documents its centrality and points to its importance as a base-line for further life changes (Fingeret and Drennon, 1997). Adult new readers may or may not have concrete, identifiable goals that correspond, for example, to the CASAS life-skill list. As one important study puts it:

Students do not necessarily have a concrete goal in mind, an instrumental view of literacy tied to some specific task or aspiration. More than anything, they want to feel that there are possibilities in the future, that there are choices and the potential for change (Original emphasis). (Fingeret and Danin, 1991, p. 45).

Such hope is nowhere better expressed in adult literacy than in the profusion of autobiographical narratives that permeate the field. As one student put it:

A lot of ideas come to mind. While, before, I had things come to mind, but I'd say, "I better not do that. That isn't going to work out." Wasn't too confident. I wasn't too sure. But now, I don't care if I'm sure or not. I just go ahead and do it. Before I would hesitate, "Shall I do it?" or "That's not right to do it." Or "Leave it alone." I'm more assured that anything I want to do, I just go ahead and do it, good, bad, right or wrong. Just be bold enough to do it. The learning process has got me to think that way" (Smith, Ball, Demetron, and Michelson, 1993, p. 108).

On speaking of the importance of the literacy program, this same student went on to add:

I think this is a big test for me. What are my limits? Right now, I'm seeking to see what that is. If I get into something that doesn't work right, I move on to the next thing. I think that's where I stand right now. I'm just taking anything I can grab onto and seeing what I can do with it (p. 109).

Among other things this student accomplished, described below, was the completion of a full-scale novel titled *A Prodigal Son of the 90s: A Family History*. That "outcome" was

the result of five or six years of hard work and very extensive immersion within the literacy program.

The autobiographical genre and the motivational dynamics which fuel it are neglected in most approaches to literacy that attempt to link its value to some narrow utilitarian costs-benefits ratio. Such texts represent an essential component of any student-centered focus, which undergirds the New Literacy Studies such as the research of Fingeret and Drennon (19997) and Merrifield et.al. (1997). Any adult literacy curriculum that seeks comprehensiveness needs to make the autobiographical impulse toward personal development a central aspect of its pedagogy and the creation and utilization of the student-generated narrative a critical dimension of its educational production.

Collaboration

A broad stream of literature also points to the importance of collaboration in adult literacy (Freire, 1970, 1985; Fingeret and Jurmo, 1989; Fingeret and Danin, 1991; Cheatham and Lawson, 1990; Cheatham, Colvin and Laminack, 1993). Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA) has recognized its importance and has expanded its focus beyond its traditional one-to-one program where a student and tutor “match,” meet in isolation from the community of learners and program staff, often in such allegedly neutral locations as the public library. While not rejecting its traditional model, LVA has incorporated a major new emphasis on small group tutoring as part of a broader socio-linguistic shift toward whole language theory and process writing. Within this context, the agency “maintains the focus on the individual learner, while adding the demonstrated value of group interaction” (Cheatham and Lawson, 1990, p.1). Through this new emphasis, “authority is shared” and “The group empowers the learners, helping them realize that through their experiences in living, loving, working, they have much to offer” (p. 4).

Within Literacy Volunteers of Greater Hartford (LVGH), small group tutoring is pervasive (Demetron, 1999). The Bob Steele Reading Center and the North End based Family Literacy Program contain approximately forty small groups in Basic Literacy and ESL that meet on a regular basis. Moreover, at the Reading Center, collaboration has become a dominant theme in student writing (Smith, 1991), in the development of oral history narratives by and for new readers (Smith et.al., 1993; Lestz, Demetron, and Smith, 1994), and in its college internship program which has spawned work in portfolio development and a pilot project in counseling and referral (Demetron, 1997a). Along with autobiographical writing, many students have expressed strong support for the collaborative environment, emphasizing the theme, “we are not alone.” As is expressed in the LVA manual, *Small Group Tutoring*:

A whole school of thought contends that we learn from each other, from our interactions with each other and with our environments. We can refine our thinking only as we discuss with others, as we read what others have written, or as we listen to what others say. This collaborative learning sees all people as social beings and learning as a social event (Cheatham and Lawson, 1990, p. 4).

Arguing similarly, Charles Schuster (1990, p. 228) states that:

Language...is the ligature that binds person to person, individual to culture, human to the world of humanity. It is the connective that binds I to *you* (original emphasis) because language is always addressed to the other.

From this perspective, language, and hence, literacy learning, is an ineradicable social phenomenon and by its nature a collaborative process.

By contrast, the view that largely comes across in much (although not all) of the CASAS task-oriented competencies is the autonomous learner working out individual solutions to basic survival functioning largely in isolation. The New Literacy Studies depicts a very different image of emerging adult new readers enmeshed in a web of relationships, seeking through increased literacy, one (at times very important) skill among others that yield enhanced self-esteem and improved sense of social competency within the very particular contexts that shape their lives. Thus, on this view, both the

community of learners and the larger communities in which adult new readers are enmeshed are inextricably connected to the literacy practices in which individuals seek to enhance their self-concept.

A Case Study

Derrick Matthews, the longest continuing student at the Reading Center, has embodied the collaborative ethos of LVGH in a particularly pronounced manner. His history, moreover, which can only be briefly sketched here, illustrates some of the complex ways in which individual autobiography intersects with more communal motives within the social environment of an adult literacy program. (Demetron, 1994, pp. 125-144, Demetron, 1997b, pp. 159-161).

Derrick, a high school graduate, discovered he had a reading problem when his minister by-passed him for a second reading of a Bible passage after he had flubbed his first attempt while attending a Bible study at his church (Demetron, 1994, 126; Smith, et.al., 1993, p. 105). Thus, the very context in which Derrick discovered his “problem” was highly social. Derrick entered the Reading Center program in order to read the Bible more easily and to become a more effective churchman.

He had not anticipated his shift in goals toward autobiographical writing once he discovered that improving his reading broadened his general learning opportunities:

I see that even for myself, reading and writing, that's all I wanted, but come to find out, it was more than that I wanted because it opened up a lot of doors. When you keep on feeding the brain with new ideas, knowledge about reading and writing and other learning skills, other doors are opened up (Demetron, 1994, p. 1).

Although his writing was highly autobiographical, Derrick did not focus on the self in “splendid isolation.” Rather he concentrated on some of the complex relationships between his interior consciousness and the various socio-cultural environments in which he was embedded. His relationship to the Reading Center and LVGH was clearly a dominant theme as is evident from the titles of some of his essays: *My Start at the LVA*

and *Working on My Dreams* and a letter to the editor of LVGH' newsletter which included the following critique:

John, I am most impressed with your wide range of vocabulary. You have impressed your intellectual readers. However, the ones not as educated as you, are not as gifted as you. With them it could be a problem. The sophisticated words that you use in your stories are difficult for the problem reader. Your vocabulary is much too hard to understand. If you want to get your point across, you must use words they can relate to.

So please, when you write an article for people in the Literacy Volunteers and for student readers, write an article that they can understand (Smith, 1991, p. 95).

In addition to writing, Derrick engaged the entire environment of the Reading Center and LVGH. He led student support groups, served as a peer tutor, operated the Reading Center on occasion, served on the affiliate's Board of Directors and was a member of LVGH's North End Committee, charged with the task of extending the interface between the agency and the African-American community.

For Derrick, therefore, as well as for many other students, personal motives are enmeshed within the quest for community. Within the Reading Center and throughout LVGH, collaboration in the effort to build community represents a natural component of the agency's organizational and learning cultures (Smith, 1991, Smith; et. al., 1993; Lestz, Demetrian and Smith, 1994, Demetrian, 1994). The examples provided here and the broader research on participatory literacy education suggest that collaboration and community building should be incorporated as an integral component to any comprehensive adult literacy curriculum. From the perspective of the New Literacy Studies, collaboration is not an add-on, but an inextricable aspect of becoming literate.

Socio-Cultural Literacy

The ethnographic literature on literacy discloses that adult new readers exhibit a deep interest in biography, short fiction, culture, and history. Adult education publishers understand this full well as is evident in such texts as *Remembering* (1990), a collection of brief oral histories which focuses on family, ethnicity, mobility and work; *Champions*

of Change (1989), which consists of biographical sketches of famous black and Hispanic leaders, and many of the essays in *Adult Reader: Comprehension* (Malone, 1981) which address themes of race, oppression, and broad based cultural analysis.

Many of the students at the Bob Steele Reading Center also expressed such interests. Angelo, for example, wanted to know “what’s happening in the world.” He was particularly interested in the Amazon Forest: “They’re destroying it, but a lot of plants are [needed for] medicine that can cure just about anything.” “If I could read, I would read the daily news.” Wayne was engrossed with a story about Martin Luther King: “It stuck in my mind for two days. I kept thinking about it.” Pearl, along with many other students wanted to learn to read the Bible better. Ralph was “fascinated with poetry.” Derrick read from escaped slave Frederick Douglass’ autobiography, *Narratives* (1968). Elaine reads articles from Time Magazine, (Demetrian, 1994, pp. 35, 61, 76, 62).

The student writing collected at the Bob Steele Reading Center also reflected a broad array of socio-cultural themes, with students drawing on fiction, biography, and contemporary issues. One group of students wrote essays in response to a Langston Hughes short story, *Thank you Ma'am* (Smith, 1991, pp. 45-46). Students at the Reading Center also read and responded to the works of Alice Walker, O’Henry, Mark Twain, Niki Giovanni, and an array of other writers contained in such texts as *Words on the Page, The World in Your Hands* (Lipkin and Solotaroff, 1990). In any comprehensive adult literacy curriculum, the reading and writing of such texts would play a significant role.

The essays in *Welcome To Our World* also illustrate the importance of contemporary social and political issues among adult literacy learners. The interest is conveyed in the titles alone of the following provocative essays: *Voices and Opinion, My Perfect Candidate, Limits on Freedom of Speech, The Justice System, Remove Rape Criminals from Civilization, Angola and Me* (Smith, 1991, pp. 42-44, 46-50). Consider

the discussion and possible range of responses the following essay might evoke in an adult basic education classroom in an examination of the criminal justice system:

Rape is a serious crime. In America, the prison sentence for taking property is greater than the sentence for rape. It would seem that people's love for money and material things has become more important than their love for one another. I can't see a person taking a TV and getting a five-year sentence, when another person who rapes a lady gets two years. You can replace a TV but the horror a lady goes through will be there forever. I never talked with a lady who had been raped. I have five sisters and the thought of that happening hurts, so I can imagine how a rape victim's family and friends feel.

According to the criminal justice system in 1984, the average sentence for burglary was 148.6 months. In the same year, the average sentence for rape was 132.8 months, of which an average of 54.7 months was actually served. The criminal justice system thinks it can actually rehabilitate criminals. I wished it worked, but it does not (Smith, 1991, p. 48).

Consider also, a collaborative assignment when students responded to former Massachusetts Governor William Weld's recommendation to cut funding for adult education programs in the state. The assignment included the reading of a brief passage and a request for the students to write a letter to Governor Weld stating their opinions on his effort to cut funding and reduce the budget. The following represents one student's response:

Dear Governor and Mrs. Weld,

I was told by one of my tutors in my Adult Education class that you are thinking to cut two of your Adult Education programs. And I would like to take this time and write to both of you and tell you I think it would be a mistake if you did.

I think there must be a way to keep your Adult Education programs. Here are some of my suggestions on how maybe you can work on this problem. 1. Maybe raise your sales tax some, as it is not as high as Connecticut's taxes are. 2. Cut the overtime in the Police and Fire Departments. 3. Maybe, have your big time businesses help you pay for some of your Adult Education programs. 4. Maybe, work on your Welfare program, reform the system. 5. Just think of the long range cost and benefit that will come out of your Adult Education program. I think I am living proof that Adult Education programs work (Smith, 1991, p. 106).

These examples and others that could be cited are illustrative of the wide interests in contemporary social and political issues that adult literacy learners possess and the complex and sophisticated manner of much of their thought. A society that valued critical democratic practice for all of its citizens would nurture such capacities even among those who are categorized typically as “undereducated” and functionally “deficient.” As the writing samples illustrate, such stereotypical thinking fails to do justice to the complexity and the richness of the lives of those who participate as students in adult literacy programs. Such an emphasis on civic education is largely neglected in the utilitarian competency-based ideological framework of the CT Bureau of Career and Adult Education.

Conclusion

Recent studies on adult literacy point to the importance of instrumental values among adult basic learners, particularly in “mainstream” programs (Eberle and Robinson, 1980; Beder and Valentine, 1990; Fingeret and Danin, 1991 and Demetron, 1994). Linking literacy development to economic need is a common source of motivation for many program participants. Yet all of these studies emphasize “the diversity of motivations leading to participation in ABE” (Beder and Valentine, 1990, p. 93) and the influence of affect and social climate on cognitive development. Through literacy, participants seek to enhance their self-esteem (Fingeret and Danin, 1991; Demetron, 1994 and Lestz, Demetron and Smith, 1994). They also desire to become linked with other learners (Fingeret and Jurmo (1989) and become increasingly informed about their own culture and those of others, and knowledgeable about contemporary affairs. They want to read for enjoyment, for self-improvement, community/church involvement as well as to function more effectively in their daily lives, as various studies, cited above, have abundantly documented.

Of fundamental significance is the concrete particularity by which adult new readers mediate goals through the social construct of the self. Literacy learning is grounded in the “felt” experience of students as they make significant connections between the various worlds of print and the on-going flow of their lives (Fingeret and Danin, 1991; Demetron, 1994). The learning/teaching dynamic requires significant improvisation along with analytical rigor since learning is as much a discovery process as it is a successful mastery of stated goals (Harris, 1987, Demetron, 1994).

These insights, which are shared by many educators and scholars, are missing from *Looking To The 21st Century* and only very marginally included in the CASAS performance indicators. In part, this is due to the fragmentation of knowledge in contemporary society where policymakers often draw on discourses grounded in quantification, behaviorism and positivism, while, particularly, humanistic scholars and ethnographers draw on narrative, history, broad based social analysis, and contemporary social philosophy to give shape to their world views.

The limited framework of adult basic education implicit in *Looking To The 21st Century*, is also the result of a top-down process of information gathering and analysis by experts, community leaders, and policymakers (Merrifield, 1998, pp. 40-41). It is not the argument of this essay that the perspectives of such groups should not be taken seriously. Yet it is to insist that the view from the top is a partial one and needs to be informed by other voices among the constituencies invested in adult literacy, with students and teachers assuming a prominent role in policymaking and curriculum development.

Recent studies of "mainstream" adult basic education programs document the importance that students place on functional outcomes. The studies also show that students identify such needs out of the particularity of their own autobiography, that cognition, affect, and social environment are intimately connected. The studies document that the quest for learning among adult literacy learners moves well beyond the functional paradigm as defined by much policy-making literature. Adult literacy learning at its best

integrates practical competency with self-knowledge and broadened understanding of culture and society. Such comprehensive knowledge can play a significant role in stimulating a deepened sense of critical citizenship among greater numbers of adults who, historically, have been marginalized in modern society.

These insights, gleaned from “the bottom-up,” might inform policy analysis to help legitimize a more comprehensive vision of adult basic education than policy studies such as *Looking To The 21st Century*. The more recent work of the National Institute for Literacy in its *Equipped for the Future* (EFF) project that links adult basic education with the imperatives of civic and economic democracy (Stein, 1995) represents a hopeful sign. This project builds upon and expands the definition of literacy articulated in the National Literacy Act as:

An individual's ability to read, write, and speak in English, and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency to function on the job and in society, to achieve one's goals, and develop one's knowledge and potential. (Amendment in the Nature of a Substitute, 1991, p. 2; cited in Quigley, 1991, p. 112).

Clearly, these more recent efforts move beyond the functional reductionism of *Looking To The 21st Century* and the policy studies of Forrest P. Chisman, both of which link adult literacy education to the imperatives of a post-industrial economy. Given their commitment to a competency-based, CASAS-driven philosophy of education it is questionable whether political actors within the ABE network in Connecticut can steer a viable reconstruction of adult basic education around the concept of citizenship, broadly defined, through the roles and responsibilities of the worker, family member, and community participant, or even a view of literacy as profoundly student-centered as suggested in the Reading Center model. Without such a reconstruction the polarity, at least in Connecticut, will remain striking between policy and research, particularly models of the latter stemming from the New Literacy Studies.

A first start toward such a reconstruction might stem from a broadened understanding of the public good of adult literacy education than the current policy

adherence to a utilitarian costs-benefits analysis (Demetron, 1997b). The model that I suggest promotes the viability of the body politic in the broadest of terms wherein enhanced literacy plays a role in strengthening mediating institutions through the increased efficacy of adult new readers and writers of texts to more effectively operate within them (Demetron, 1997b).

This role theory of local institutional building is resoundingly amplified in the EFF project, the boldest initiative to date to link individual learner goals with broader public outcomes. The EFF partners have built their model through an iterative process of field testing in each of the six stages of the project's unfolding (Stein, 1997, p. 21). In addition to drawing upon "bottom-up" insights of adult learners and direct program staff, the initiative has also drawn on top-down influences among the nation's foremost adult literacy institutions, think tanks, policy advocates, and researchers.

Whether the national consensus that the EFF development partners seek is likely to emerge is another matter and the project is not without its problems (Demetron, 1998). In the final analysis the quest to integrate research, policy, and practice (Merrifield, 1998) may be highly constrained by the intellectual paradigms that shape the operative assumptions of the diverse constituency that comprise the ABE/adult literacy "community." Rather than consensus, making the political more pedagogical and the pedagogical more political may require perpetual struggle and conflict. The divergence in views between the operative assumptions of the CT Bureau of Career and Adult Education and the Bob Steele Reading Center during its pioneering decade is symptomatic of a broader national struggle currently carried out between the policy advocates of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 and the academic researchers of the New Literacy Studies. Strategic convergence may be possible as is indicative of Title II of the Act, the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, which opens space for family literacy, ESL, and basic skills development (NIFL, 1998). Moreover, perhaps the EFF initiative will establish a greater sense of coherence in bringing practice, research, and

policy into closer proximity with each other. When the most fundamental assumptions of practitioners, researchers, and policymakers are really pressed, however, beyond the quest for pragmatic alliances, it is at least questionable as to how likely the antipathies can be resolved. *Looking To The 21st Century* has cast a long shadow on adult literacy and ABE in Connecticut that has many parallels across the nation in the era of welfare reform and school to work initiatives that focus on the “quick fix.” Can system reform overcome or reconstruct a century of literacy and ABE social policy based on the deficit model, what Allan Quigley (1997, pp. 66-100) refers to as “A Century of Fear and Loathing?” One has to wonder even while searching for practical solutions.

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