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A Fantasy in Three Themes for Adult Literacy Education

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American Heritage Dictionary Definition:

Fantasy. 2. A medley of familiar themes, with variations and interludes.

The Conductor enters to much applause, raises the baton calling the orchestra to attention, the house goes silent, and the concert starts with the first of three familiar themes in adult literacy education:

1. Competency Based Adult Education. Theeee're Baaack! Just when you thought CBAE with all those thousands of separate, discrete "competencies" (the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) has over five thousand test items in its bank, each of which can be considered a "competency") was gone, and it was safe to think about constructivist approaches to teaching and learning to develop rich >bodies of knowledge, with critical reflection about interrelationships among thoughts and ideas, that could help solve numerous problems of daily life, promote professionalism in numerous occupations, and provide recreational reading, spiritual uplifting and all the rich experiences that depend on literacy and knowledge, ...you're wrong! Building on thirty years of failing to get CBAE ensconced in adult >literacy education, with test data from California showing no improvement in learning after over a decade of trying to switch programs to CBAE, the powers that be have now shifted from trying to use CBAE with students and instead are trying to use it with teachers! Visit the >Pro-Net 2000 (1) site to read the numerous "competencies" that you, as a teacher, need to be considered qualified for the work you have been doing for decades.
2. Unlearning Literacy. Almost thirty years ago (1974) a colleague and I prepared a paper entitled "The Problem of Negative Gain Scores in the Evaluation of Reading Programs." (2) The paper ascribed the major sources of such scores to three properties of the standardized tests typically used in pre- and post-testing: response format, content, and instructions and we discussed issues in deleting negative gain scores from the summary statistics used to evaluate the gain in achievement due to literacy education. Still, the issue of negative gain in adult literacy education is hardly ever discussed. For example, a year 2000 report from MassInc. (3) reported some 4 percent negative gain scores and 40 percent no change in scores in ABE and a year 2001 report from the United Kingdom's Basic Skills Agency (4) reported over 30 percent negative gain scores with no discussion of how these zero and negative gain scores were treated. But if in reporting to the National Reporting System we interpret positive gain to mean learning, shouldn't we interpret zero gain to mean no learning and negative gain to mean unlearning? Can students who have spent time in programs and learned nothing and those who have had their literacy unlearned sue for damages?
3. Learner Centered. For decades adult educators have emphasized the importance of being "learner-centered" . Pro-Net 2000 professional development competencies also emphasize being learner centered. For instance, under Competency 12, Indictors of Competency 12.3 states, "Shares with learner appropriate decision making responsibilities", and 12.4 states, "Links instruction to learner's needs assessments." Yet in a 1998 survey of over 270 adult literacy programs across the United States NCSALL researchers (5) reported only 10 percent that involved learners in dialogue and decision making to a meaningful degree. At the level of large-scale literacy needs assessments, the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) in commenting on the fact that so few adults in literacy Level 1 said they read poorly for their work simply dismissed adult self-assessments of their literacy skills in a sidebar that states "Most people do not recognize that they have a literacy problem.." (6). Learner centered needs assessment is apparently good at the local level but not at the national and international level. It seems the "experts" know what adults need without asking them, even if teachers don't.

Intermission time. be back in another thirty years!

Score:

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1. Pro-Net 2000 web site: www.pro-net2000.org
 2. Caylor, J. & Sticht, T. (1974, April). The Problem of Negative Gain Scores in the Evaluation of Reading Programs. Chicago, IL: paper presented at the meeting of the American Educational Research Association.
 3. Comings, J., Sum, A. & Uvin, J. (with others) (2000, December). New Skills for a New Economy: Adult Education's Key Role in Sustaining Economic Growth and Expanding Opportunity, Boston, MA: MassInc.
 4. Brooks, G. et al (2001, January). Progress in Adult Literacy: Do Learners Learn? London: Basic Skills Agency.
 5. Purcell-Gates, V. et al (1998, July) U. S. Adult Literacy Program Practice: A Typology Across Dimensions of Life-Contextualized/Decontextualized and Dialogic/Monologic. NCSALL Reports #2. Cambridge, MA: National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy.
 6. Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (1995). Literacy, Economy and Society. Paris: OECD (page 101).
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