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Seven Pioneering Adult Literacy Educators in the History of Teaching Reading With Adults in the United States

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Prologue

The Slave Girl Harriet Jacobs and her Work to Teach Slaves and Former Slaves to Read

One of the earliest accounts of teaching an adult to read comes from the work of the slave Harriet A. Jacobs (1813-1897). Even though it was unlawful to teach slaves to read, Jacob's owner's daughter taught her to read and write. In 1861, after she became a free woman, Jacobs wrote a book entitled, "Incidents in the life of a slave girl written by herself" (Jacobs, 1987/1861). In it she tells the story of how she helped an older black man, a slave like her, learn to read. She said, " He thought he could plan to come three times a week without its being suspected. I selected a quiet nook, where no intruder was likely to penetrate, and there I taught him his A, B, C. Considering his age, his progress was astonishing. As soon as he could spell in two syllables he wanted to spell out words in the Bible. ... At the end of six months he had read through the New Testament, and could find any text in it."

Later in her life, after achieving her freedom, Jacobs taught school for former slaves in what were called the Freedmen's Schools. These schools were set up after the Civil War when the U. S. Congress created the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands as the primary agency for reconstruction (Morris, 1981). In the Freedmen's Schools it was not unusual for both children and their parents to be taught reading, writing, spelling, and arithmetic in the same classroom at the same time. This was an early form of "family literacy" education.

Special textbooks were developed for the Freedmen's Schools that emphasized practical affairs of life and the instilling of positive values. For instance, a lesson from *The Freedman's Second Reader*, published by the Boston wing of the American Tract Society in 1865 first presents a list of words for sight reading instruction, but with some attention to phonics (e.g., What letter is silent in hoe?). It shows a drawing of an African-American family gathered around a table listening while the father reads. Beneath the drawing the text says:

"THE FREEDMAN'S HOME

See this home! How neat, how warm,
how full of cheer it looks! It seems as
if the sun shone in there all the day long.
But it takes more than the light of the sun
to make a home bright all the time. Do
you know what it is? It is love."

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Developing positive self-image and promoting religious faith was also a purpose of many of the Freedmen's Schools educators. As an example of how self-concept development and religious beliefs were approached, The Freedman's Third Reader includes a story about the African-American poet Phyllis Wheatley. Like the example above, the lesson begins with a list of sight words. Then below that is a drawing of Phyllis Wheatley and this is followed by a brief story which tells how Wheatley was brought to the United States from Africa in 1761, who bought her as a slave, and her appearance when purchased. The story concludes: "The life of Phillis Wheatley gives most interesting proof of the power of talents and virtues, crowned with "the pearl of great price," – the love of Christ, - to raise one from the lowest position to the notice and the esteem of the wise and good."

The work of Harriet Jacobs and the teachers of the Freedmen's schools illustrate two aspects of teaching reading with adults during the 19th century. First, Jacob's used what she called the "A,B, C" method, which others have referred to as the "alphabetic" method. Second, specially written Freedman's readers oriented their lessons to the types of things that the authors thought would be of interest and relevance to former slaves, both children and adults, and they included illustrations with African-American children and adults in them. This is an early form of what I call "functional context education" in teaching adults to read.

Methods in Teaching Reading With Adults

Shortly after the turn of the century, Huey (1968/1908) published his classic volume on The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading. In it he pointed out that "The methods of learning to read that are in common use to-day may be classed as alphabetic, phonic, phonetic, word, sentence, and combination methods." Eight years later, Klapper (1914) published a book in which he developed a new classification system for methods of teaching reading. In his system he created two divisions, one for the Synthetic Methods and the other for the Analytic Methods.

As Synthetic Methods, Klapper included the Alphabetic, Phonic, and Phonetic methods. In the classification system that Jeanne Chall (1967) developed, these methods would be called those of a "code emphasis" and the contemporary term would be "alphabetics." These methods consider the teaching of reading as essentially a means of "decoding" the written text to recover a spoken message which is then comprehended as usual. In these methods parts of speech sounds are associated with the letters of the alphabet, and then with written syllables and then with words in a synthesis of parts into wholes.

As Analytic Methods, Klapper included the Word Basis, and Thought Basis. Under the Thought Basis method he included the Sentence Unit and the Story Unit. In Jeanne Chall's classification system, the Analytic Methods would be called "meaning emphasis" and the contemporary term would be "whole language." These methods consider the teaching of reading as essentially a means of "meaning making" and consider the written text as a guide for the learner to use in constructing the meaning the author has in mind. The meaning making process serves as an aid to learning to decode the written language in a whole to part analysis process.

Throughout the 20th century, both Synthetic and Analytic methods of teaching reading have been favored by different adult literacy educators. Among the adult literacy educators favoring the Synthetic or "code" methods are Harriet A. Jacobs (1987/1861), J. Duncan Spaeth (1919) and Frank Laubach (1947, 1960). Those

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favoring the Analytic or "meaning making" methods include Cora Wilson Stewart (1922), Paul Witty (1947,1943), Francis P. Robinson (1946), and Septima Poinsette Clark (1962,1986)

In addition to illustrating one or the other of the two major sub-divisions of reading teaching methods, each of these seven educators have introduced innovations in teaching adult literacy beyond their emphasis upon either the code or the meaning methods. Jacobs has been discussed above, each of the others is discussed below in chronological order of their work.

Cora Wilson Stewart (1875-1958)

A leading pioneer of adult literacy education, Cora Wilson Stewart, Superintendent of Instruction in Rowan County, Kentucky, initiated the first campaign aimed specifically at eradicating adult illiteracy in the state. She noticed that many parents of the children in the public schools were illiterate. So she mobilized a group of teachers who volunteered to teach adults to read and write. The adults would be taught in the same schools as the children but at night, after the children went home. But because there were no street lights in the hills and hollows of the region, classes could only be held on moon lit nights, when adults could see their way to school. For this reason, the literacy program became known as the Moonlight Schools of Kentucky, and they operated from 1911 to the 1930s.

In 1913, building on a finding of the second session Moonlight Schools that one-on-one tutoring in homes could be successful the slogan "Each one teach one," was adopted (Stewart, 1922). This was a slogan that Frank Laubach would rediscover years later.

Stewart was devoted to the analytic method of teaching reading. This is clearly indicated in the *Soldier's First Book* which she published in 1917 for teaching soldiers to read during World War I. In the Instructions to Teachers at the front of the book, she states, "The reading lessons in this book are to be taught by the word and sentence method combined. It is as easy to teach "I go" as it is to teach I "g" "o"--- "go". The first lesson should be learned at one recitation. After teaching the pupil the sentence, drill him on words by pointing out and having him point out each word as many times as it occurs in the lesson, and by other drills."

A typical lesson would consist of reading a list of sight words at the top of the lesson page in a reader. Then sentences using the words would be read, and then practice in writing a sentence using the words would take place.

Stewart produced an innovative method for teaching adults to write. She understood that for adults who had to make a mark in public events, such as voting, nothing was more important than learning how to write their names. So she introduced the practice of taking a soft sheet of ink blotting paper and carving the person's name in it. Students then traced over the indented name until they could write it without any guide from the blotter paper. Later this approach to teaching writing would be called the "kinesthetic method."

Stewart was the first to produce reading materials especially for adults learning to read. She prepared a special newspaper, the *Rowan County Messenger*, to keep new learners up to date with local and national events. She wrote three *Country Readers*

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with contents that were related directly to the lives of adults outside the classroom, such as on the farm, health, civic activities, parenting, and other topics, including spiritual development, a topic no longer addressed in most adult literacy programs in the United States. This use of functional context education helped adults learn to read "real life" materials and transfer their new learning to contexts outside the classroom.

J. Duncan Spaeth (1868-1954)

During World War I, John Duncan Spaeth, a native of Philadelphia with a Ph. D. in early Anglo-Saxon literature from the University of Leipzig, took time away from his position as Professor of English at Princeton University and worked as Educational Director of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) at Camp Wheeler, Georgia and Camp Jackson, South Carolina. Because large numbers of men being called for military service were illiterate, or of very limited literacy, schooling in reading and writing became a necessary element of military training.

In 1918, the Southwestern Department of the National War Work Department of the Y.M.C.A. in Atlanta, Georgia published the "Camp Reader for American Soldiers," written by Spaeth. In this book Spaeth acknowledged the help of Cora Wilson Stewart. But in a revised edition published in 1919 there was no recognition of Stewart's influence. In fact, Spaeth rejected the analytic method of teaching reading that Stewart favored and instead became the first person to prepare an extensive theoretical introduction to the synthetic method of reading teaching written especially for teachers of adults.

In the preface to the 1918 edition of the Camp Reader Spaeth devoted just three paragraphs to introducing the principles underlying the lessons and explained that, "The "Camp Reader for American Soldiers" is more than a mere reader. It combines exercises in reading, writing, phonics, and spelling in each lesson. The essence of the method here advocated lies in the simultaneous acquisition of the ability to read words, to recognize and differentiate articulate sounds and sound groups, to associate them with visual symbols, and to write these symbols. The three types of association must go hand in hand, and it is therefore essential that in each hour part of the time be devoted to reading, part to phonic drill, and part to exercises in writing."

In the 1919 revision of the Camp Reader, Spaeth expanded his discussion of the instructional principles of the lessons from three paragraphs to six pages. In these pages, he produced what appear to be the first teacher training materials for adult literacy educators that discussed relationships among the four communication processes of listening, speaking, reading, and writing and he provided an explanation of the phonetic system of reading (phonics) and its relevance to writing. Throughout the book, extensive footnotes further instruct the teacher in the teaching of phonics, and extensive drills are provided on decoding lists of words. In this book, Spaeth showed clearly that he was a proponent of the methods of teaching reading and writing that rely heavily upon the understanding of the written language as a substitution code for the spoken language, and he advised considerable attention to the teaching of the decoding and encoding of the written language through phonics. He also presents teacher training materials for teaching literacy and English as a

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second language for foreign-speaking students. In these lessons, instruction moves from listening and speaking to reading and writing.

Though he eschewed the analytic method of teaching reading favored by Stewart, Spaeth used the same functional context education approach in the Camp Reader for American Soldiers as used by Stewart in the Country Life Readers and the Soldier's First Book that she had prepared for teaching soldiers to read in World War I. Spaeth's Camp Reader for American Soldiers was illustrated with pictures of Army situations and it included much of the vocabulary and concepts used in training in soldiering that the Army expected new recruits to learn, and it provided spiritual and morale building readings as well.

Frank C. Laubach (1884-1970)

According to the New York Times of June 12, 1970, in 1911, the year Cora Wilson Stewart started the Moonlight Schools, Frank C. Laubach received a master's degree in sociology from Columbia. In 1913, the year that the "each one teach one" slogan was invented for use in Kentucky, Laubach received his doctorate in sociology. In 1914 he was ordained a Congregationist minister and a year later, in 1915, he and his wife left for the Philippines to work as missionaries.

A chronology from the Laubach Literacy library in Syracuse, New York reports that in 1930, "While working as a missionary among the Maranao people of the Philippines, Frank C. Laubach developed a simple method to teach them to learn to read and write in their own language. He also discovered the potential of volunteer tutors, as newly-literate Maranaos offered to teach illiterate family and friends. This one-to-one instructional approach became known as "Each One Teach One." A review of books by Laubach (1947, 1960) revealed no citation of the earlier origins of the "each one teach one" slogan in the work of Cora Wilson Stewart. For now, it appears that this slogan that has played a major role in advancing the policy and practice of using volunteers in adult literacy programs may have had two separate birthplaces, first in the hills and hollows of Kentucky, and some fifteen years later in the dense jungles of Mindanao Island in the Philippines.

Like Spaeth, Laubach (1947, 1960) followed the synthetic or alphabetic code method in teaching reading as a second signaling system for listening to speech. In teaching decoding, one of his major innovations for teaching adults was to use picture mnemonics to teach the sight-sound correspondences, such as using a picture of a snake curved to look like an "s" to teach the sound that goes with the graphic letter "s".

In 1955, Laubach started Laubach Literacy in the United States and through this organization thousands of volunteers were taught to teach reading the "Each One Teach One" way. In materials called the Laubach Way to Reading for new readers there were four structured workbooks that presented letter-sound correspondences. Following tightly scripted tutoring manuals and graded readers using word lists that Laubach assembled, adults were taught decoding and then introduced to reading texts of increasing difficulty.

In these readings, Laubach followed functional context education principles and incorporated materials that were selected to be of interest to adults. This approach was developed earlier in India where Laubach had been invited by Mahatma Gandhi

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to help in preparing materials for teaching adults to read. In this work volunteers surveyed villagers to find out what they most wanted to learn. The answer was agriculture, religion and, surprisingly, movies of which they had only heard but wanted to know more.

Paul A. Witty (1898-1976)

During World War II, just as in World War I, the armed services once again faced the need to utilize hundreds of thousands of men who were illiterate or poorly literate. Paul Andrew Witty, with an M.A. (1923) and Ph. D. (1931) from Columbia University in Psychology, specialized in understanding the process of learning to read and in developing methods for helping students who were having difficulties in learning to read. With this background, he was called upon to serve as an education officer in the War Department.

In May of 1943 the War Department published TM 21-500, entitled the "Army Reader". In this book, which was produced under Witty's direction, soldiers in the Army's Special Training Units for literacy instruction were introduced to Private Pete, a fictional soldier in a Special Training Unit who was also learning reading, writing, and arithmetic. The idea was that soldier's would be able to identify with Private Pete and understand what they were reading about him because they shared common experiences, such as living in the camp, sleeping in the barracks, eating in the mess hall, and so forth. These were all things that Private Pete did in the Army Reader. Witty was apparently the first to use this approach of trying to motivate adults learning to read by providing a fictional counterpart with whom they could identify.

Witty's analytic approach reflected the influence of William S. Gray, one of the founders of the famous Dick and Jane series for children, which provided a model for Witty's use of Private Pete in the Army Reader, and Arthur I. Gates, a leading reading professor at Columbia University. Both of these men were advocates of the analytic or "meaning emphasis" approach known as the "word" method. In this method students first developed readiness to read by discussing illustrations from the readers. Then they learned a basic store of sight words used in the readiness training. Then they moved on to simple sentences made up of the sight words. In this approach, phonics instruction was downplayed and postponed until the students could do quite a bit of reading based upon discussion and whole word recognition training.

In the Private Pete program, the teacher's guide of some 26 pages never goes into the teaching of phonics. Indeed, in Samuel Goldberg's (1951) book, *Army Training of Illiterates in World War II*, it is reported that, against advice, some of the teachers were making "excessive use of phonics in teaching word recognition and pronunciation." This was followed by a list of "unfortunate results" resulting from the over use of phonics

against instructions to teach phonics only sparingly including: "first, the men were often being taught words, which happened to sound like others they already knew, but for which they had no real use; second, they were being taught words whose meaning they did not know; and third, they were being taught techniques which did not apply uniformly in all situations because of the non-phonetic character of the English language" (p. 200).

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Witty's program for the Army introduced several innovations in adult literacy education, including early use of audio-visual technologies such as film strips, cartoon strips in *Our War*, a special newspaper for literacy students, and photo novellas in which Private Pete and his buddy Daffy were portrayed in photographs of soldiers as actors in materials used to teach reading to soldiers about to be discharged from military service. The program also innovated with unit tests to measure progress towards achieving the goal of 4th grade reading ability.

Francis P. Robinson (1906-Unknown)

World War II not only served to teach reading to the poorly educated and least literate adults, it also served higher level students like those in developmental reading programs in colleges (Pauk, 1999). In what was known as the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP), United States colleges were swamped by Army personnel who were on campus to take courses for hundreds of specialized skills needed to win the war. The courses these soldiers had to take were accelerated, highly concentrated, and placed considerable demands on reading and mastering the content of difficult technical manuals. Under such conditions, many men were experiencing reading and learning difficulties.

At the Ohio State University, administrators sought methods that would help the military personnel on campus meet the challenges of their accelerated, technical courses. They found help in the person of Professor Francis Robinson, a member of the psychology department faculty.

Robinson was selected to head a new Learning and Study Skills program that would teach military personnel to learn better by reading. Following his psychological research training, Robinson conducted studies of the student's reading skills and found that they approached their reading using unsystematic, haphazard methods that failed to lead to good comprehension and retention.

After reviewing research and approaches to effective study skills, Robinson came up with a formula for reading and study that has endured for two-thirds of a century. He developed what is called the SQ3R method of reading and studying. In this method, students are taught to first Survey the text and to raise Questions about the meaning of what they are reading, then they Read the text carefully, stopping now and then to construct and Recite to themselves summary statements of what they have just read, and to later Review what they have read.

The SQ3R method is today referred to as a "study skill" and sometimes a "reading comprehension strategy" and is one of several such strategies that can be subsumed under the label of "active reading strategies" which advise readers to take actions Before they read (as in Surveying and Questioning), While they read (as in Reciting) and After they read (as in Reviewing).

Septima Poinsette Clark (1898-1987)

Septima Poinsette Clark, the great civil rights teacher from the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee was an innovator in teaching adult reading and writing within the functional context of the civil rights movement to free African-Americans from

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the oppression of those wanting to deny them full citizenship. In this regard, she pre-dated the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire in developing a Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire, 1970).

Clark followed the analytic, "meaning-making" method in teaching word recognition and followed functional context education methods in using "real life" materials for teaching adults to read (Clark, 1986). On January 7, 1957, Clark and her teachers started the first Citizenship School serving adult African-Americans on Johns Island in South Carolina. Clark (1962) recalled that when the teachers asked the students what they wanted to learn, the answer was that, "First, they wanted to learn how to write their names. That was a matter of pride as well as practical need. (p. 147).

In teaching students to write their names, Clark used what she said was the "kinesthetic" method which she had learned from Wil Lou Gray, State Superintendent of Adult Education in South Carolina in the middle of the 20th century. Gray, in turn had learned the method from Cora Wilson Stewart and used it as part of an anti-illiteracy campaign across South Carolina called the "Sign-Your-Own-Name" campaign in one county and "I'll Write My Own Name" campaign elsewhere in the state. The Write-Your-Name Crusade aimed to get adults into literacy programs to learn to sign their names when voting and in other important situations.

The method that Gray used to teach writing was similar to that used by Stewart, whose books called the Country Life Readers were also used by Gray in South Carolina literacy schools in the 1920s. According to Ayres (1988), Gray recommended to teachers that they "...use a thorn or hairpin to trace letters on copy papers prepared so students could practice at home." (p. 101). Ayers suggests that this may have been an early use of what Ayers calls the "kinesthetic" method of teaching reading and writing and that Gray may have been the first proponent of this method for adults. But the fact that Gray was acquainted with Stewart, her methods, and books suggests that Gray learned the method from Stewart.

Following Gray's lead, Clark instructed teachers to write student's names on cardboard. Then, according to Clark (1962), "What the student does is trace with his pencil over and over his signature until he gets the feel of writing his name. I suppose his fingers memorize it by doing it over and over; he gets into the habit by repeating the tracing time after time." (p.148). She went on to say, "And perhaps the single greatest thing it accomplishes is the enabling of a man to raise his head a little higher; knowing how to sign their names, many of those men and women told me after they had learned, made them FEEL different. Suddenly they had become a part of the community; they were on their way toward first-class citizenship." (p. 149).

Summary of Innovations and Outcomes

Table 1 below summarizes some of the important innovations in adult reading instruction that these seven pioneer adult literacy educators introduced. Table 2 summarizes data from various sources which indicate some of the outcomes in literacy that four of the seven pioneers achieved.

It is astonishing to realize that across half a century, Cora Wilson Stewart, Wil Lou Gray, and Septima Poinsette Clark all used the same simple instructional technique to teach adults to write their names, that this technique was used by Clark in the development of the Citizenship schools of the Southern Christian Leadership

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Conference, and this technique eventually taught 10,000 teachers and registered 700,000 thousand African Americans to vote in the South. Amazingly, a simple technique used by adult literacy educators for teaching adults to write their names was instrumental in forging the Civil Rights movement of the late 1950s and 60s.

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Table 1

Seven adult literacy education pioneers and some of their innovations in adult reading instruction.

(Note: All followed functional context education principles).

Harriet A. Jacobs

First former slave to document teaching another slave to read.

Cora Wilson Stewart

First newspaper for adults.

First to use the slogan: Each One Teach One.

First Functional Context Education Materials for Soldiers in WWI.

First Family Literacy Book: "Mother's First Book".

First use of "kinesthetic method" for teaching writing.

First textbook on adult literacy education: "Moonlight Schools".

J. Duncan Spaeth

First teacher's instruction manual in theory of reading as one of four Communication skills (listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing).

First teacher's instruction for English language learners.

Frank C. Laubach

First to use systematic mnemonics in teaching adult reading.

Paul A. Witty

First use of audio-visual technology in adult reading teaching.

First use of instructional curriculum using instructional units

With pre- and post-unit tests for checking progress.

First use of texts with characters with whom students identify.

First use of photo-novellas with characters with whom students identify.

Francis P. Robinson

First to systematize an active strategy for improving reading comprehension
And learning from textbooks through study.

First to use a reading improvement formula-SQ3R

Septima Poinsette Clark

First to focus adult reading and writing on praxis for the overcoming

Of oppression predating Paulo Freire.

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Table 2

Numbers of Adults Made Literate Through the Work of Four of the Seven Pioneers of Adult Literacy Education.

Cora Wilson Stewart and the Moonlight Schools

Kentucky – 130,000

N. Carolina – 10,000

Georgia – 17,892

Alabama – 25,000

Total: 182,892

J. Duncan Spaeth and World War I

Y.M.C.A. in Development Battalions -
(Illiterate and non-English-speaking troops
with literacy education by February 1919.

25,000

Paul A. Witty and World War II

(Graduated from Special Training Units)

254,272

Septima Poinsette Clark

(Southern Christian Leadership Conference
Citizenship Schools)

700,000

Total: 1,162,164