

Adult Literacy: What's Hot and What's Not in 2003?

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On June 30 we reached the half way mark of 2003, in terms of months. In terms of days, June 30 marked the 181st day of the year. To find out what topics in adult literacy education are in and which ones seem to be out, I tallied the number of messages posted to the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) lists as of noon on June 30.

The following 5 lists posted at least one message or more per day in 2003.

- ESL 552 messages
- AALPD 464
- Family 234
- Women 189
- Health 181

The following 3 lists posted about 0.6 to 0.97 messages per day.

- Technology 175
- EFF 140
- POVRAC 111

The following 7 lists posted fewer than 0.5 messages a day.

- Numeracy 80
- Focus on Basics 78
- Assessment 66
- Library 52
- Workplace 51
- Learning Disability 38
- Homelessness 8

The foregoing 7 lists include two which were at one time very active. In 1999 the Learning Disabilities list posted some 1161 messages, or about 6.4 messages per day. If the present rate of postings stays constant, the LD list will post only 76 messages in 2003, a dramatic fall from 1999. Why has LD dropped so much?

The Workplace list had 812 postings, over 2.2 per day, in 1996, but this dropped to 667 in 2000, and then fell precipitously to 367 in 2001, to 219 in 2002, and this year if the present trend persists the Workplace list will post only 102 messages. This seems out of place with the federal government's interest in the use of the federal adult basic education and literacy program to improve employment.

Also of interest is the relatively low number of postings to the Focus on Basics (FOB) list which is supposed to be the list for getting research into practice. Given the interest in scientific, evidence-based approaches to adult literacy education, it seems that the FOB list, which represents the work of the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, is dramatically underutilized.

One of the perennial issues that is supposed to be of interest to the adult literacy field is assessment, but if postings to the NIFL lists is any indicator of interest in assessment, it ranks 11th out of 15, hardly indicative of major interest in assessment.

If we assume that topics of major interest result in at least 1 message per day, then only one-third (5 out of 15) of the NIFL lists appear to be of major interest. This includes both the Technology and EFF lists which represent areas in which federal funds have been and are continuing to be invested to promote interest in these areas.

The ESL list continues to rack up high postings as it has for over 5 years. The new Association of Adult Literacy Professional Developers (AALPD) has scored high postings in just 4 months. This is similar to what happened to the Poverty and Race (POVRACLIT) list. When it started there were 334 postings in just a little over 3 months in 2000 when it started up. But the next year it dropped to only 358 postings and in 2002 to 309 postings. This suggests that some topics invite an initial spurt of people posting messages and then a rapid decline in postings. If POVRACLIT continues at the present trend, it will drop from 309 postings in 2002 to 222 in 2003. Does this indicate a drop in interest of issues of poverty and race in the adult literacy education field?

If the NIFL lists are any indication, interest in the homeless continues a multiple year reign of being practically nonexistent.

Of course, all this raises the question of just what do the NIFL lists indicate about what the adult literacy field thinks is hot and what it thinks is not.