

Toward an Evidence-Based Adult Education and Literacy System (AELS)

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The National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) publishes a journal entitled Focus on Basics (FOB). The current issue of FOB discusses research and practice related to curriculum. Repeatedly, articles in the FOB present evidence supporting one or more of the principles from Functional Context Education (FCE) first presented as a set in a book entitled Cast-off Youth: Policy and Training Methods From the Military Experience (Sticht, et al, Praeger, 1987).

The FCE principles include

1. Consider the old knowledge that students bring with them to the course, and build new knowledge on the basis of this old knowledge (facilitates entry learning)
2. Sequence each new lesson so that it builds on prior knowledge gained in the previous lessons (facilitates in-course learning).
3. Integrate instruction in reading, writing, arithmetic, and problem solving into academic or technical training programs as the content of the course poses requirements for information processing using these skills that many potential students may not possess; avoid decontextualized basic skills "remedial" programs (facilitates in-course learning; motivates basic skills learning; reduces instruction time; develops "learning to learn" ability).
4. Derive objectives from careful analysis of the explicit and tacit knowledge and skill needed in the home, community, academic, technical training, or employment context for which the learner is preparing (facilitates transfer).
5. Use, to the extent possible, learning contexts, tasks, materials, and procedures taken from the future situation in which the learner will be functioning (facilitates transfer).

In the current issue of FOB articles by Heide Spruck Wrigley, Kay Taggart & Sara Martinez provide examples of the implementation of FCE principle #1: build new knowledge on the basis of old knowledge. In some cases, the use of an ESOL students native language (old knowledge) to build English language or literacy skills (new knowledge) is illustrated.

Mary Lynn Carver presents a good illustration of FCE principle #2: Sequence each new lesson so that it builds on prior knowledge gained in the previous lessons (facilitates in-course learning) in her discussion of the use of structured "multisensory" programs to teach the alphabetic principle to beginning level readers. She suggests that the more intense (more hours per week) the program, the better the attendance and learning.

Work by Charissa Ahlstrom, Heide Spruck Wrigley, Victoria Purcell-Gates, and others is presented to suggest that when adults learn in classrooms that use "authentic" or

"real world" materials and tasks they are more likely to transfer learning in the classroom to actual use in the home or other community settings outside the classroom (these articles emphasize FCE principles 3,4,5).

It is significant that a larger body of research and experience in adult literacy education is being developed that supports the adult learning theory and practice as first formulated in Cast-off Youth. In adult education, theories of adult learning and development have usually been based on anecdotal data and beliefs from the experiences of adult educators. In contrast, Functional Context Education (FCE) is an approach to adult education that draws upon a cognitive science theory of cognitive development, learning, and instruction supported by empirical research studies of a scientific, experimental or quasi-experimental nature with adult learners in vocational training and adult literacy education. This provides a first step toward the development of an evidence-based Adult Education and Literacy System (AELS).

Additional references, the theoretical framework, and the principles of FCE for applying this framework to the task of instructional development are discussed further in the 1997 Functional Context Education (FCE) Workshop Resource Notebook available for free pdf downloading from

<http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/context/cover.htm>

(or www.nald.ca under Full Text Documents searched by S for Sticht.) The notebook presents theory of cognition and literacy, and it provides evidence for the effectiveness of FCE and examples of FCE type programs.

For the latest issue of Focus on Basics go to <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/~ncsall/>