

2021

A Life in the Day of an Adult Literacy Tutor: A Perspective on Tutoring Adults

June Hyjek
junehyjek@hyjek.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/lpr>



Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Commons](#), and the [Language and Literacy Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hyjek, June (2021) "A Life in the Day of an Adult Literacy Tutor: A Perspective on Tutoring Adults," *Literacy Practice and Research*: Vol. 46 : No. 1 , Article 1.

DOI: 10.25148/lpr.009344

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/lpr/vol46/iss1/1>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Literacy Practice and Research* by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcc@fiu.edu.

A LIFE IN THE DAY OF AN ADULT LITERACY TUTOR
A Perspective on Tutoring Adults

In the Beginning

My literacy story is that of the child of an immigrant. My family came to the U.S. from Canada, and my Dad obtained his U.S. citizenship by enlisting in the Army. He learned English as his second language, learned the American culture through natural curiosity, observation and diligence, and learned discipline courtesy of our U.S. Army. As his daughter, however, I do believe the discipline was probably more inherent than it was learned.

Like most immigrant parents, he wanted his children to do better than he did, and he knew that a good education was essential to making that happen. While people may have widely differing views about what constitutes a “good” education, my father had a specific philosophy.

My Dad believed that the world revolved around science, math and language. He said science would teach you to be curious about your world; math would teach you to reason logically – and it was all useless if you couldn’t communicate it.

My father never went to college, but that didn’t make him any less intelligent or less able to study and understand our world and its people. Since he had to learn English himself, he knew that communication and language meant what most people consider the ability to read and write. However, he also knew that literacy was about expression, and that people expressed themselves in a variety of forms. So, we were always given opportunities to explore and learn how we could best communicate – music, art, dance, and words – understanding that one single form of communication, one type of literacy, was not what was right for all instances. That said, reading and writing were never far from front and center.

So, while I played the piano and my childhood dream career was to be an artist, it shouldn’t come as a surprise that I have always been and remain an avid reader. A book has never more than 12 inches from my nose and the next

few books are lying in wait close by. Writing was an integral function of my corporate career, and I have been fortunate to have published a couple books since then. At the ripe old age of 23, in my early corporate life as a News Assistant for a major Fortune 100 company, I was responsible for writing the corporate newsletter. One day, after plunking the latest edition of the newsletter on my boss' desk, I asked him, "Does anyone LIKE to write?" This old curmudgeon of a journalist, whose office was decorated with stacks of newspapers piled several feet high, replied, "No. They just decide it's worth the effort." It took a long time, but yes, I discovered it was not only worth the effort, but incredibly satisfying and absolutely essential.

I love the sound, the cadence, the beauty and the power of words. Communication is the essence of our connection to each other. It is our ability to create, to shape and share our messages, and it is our ability to influence. Words can soothe, rile, sadden, hurt and uplift. There are words for every emotion, and communication is a valuable tool for understanding and dealing with those emotions. To take a leaf from my Dad's page, communication creates purpose out of our curiosity and reason for our logic. Yes, my father was right.

It is that love of communication, reverence of words, a desire to share my message, and a deeply ingrained need to have purpose and make a difference, that led me to become a volunteer literacy tutor for adults. If I could just instill in my students this love of books, words, and the beauty of sharing thoughts, ideas and opinions, I could – perhaps, maybe, possibly, hopefully – give someone the tools they need to believe in themselves, create change and deepen their lives.

So the Journey Begins

I completely understand and acknowledge the advantages I have with this kind of foundation and understanding of the importance of communications and literacy. Not all of us, even those whose families have been in the U.S. for generations, have been handed a gift like this. In fact, there are far too many who attend and graduate from our own American high schools who cannot read or write. The shock I felt when I learned this has still not worn off.

I began volunteering with the Hillsborough Literacy Council (HLC) in the Florida Tampa Bay area in 2018. HLC sponsors two programs: Adult Basic Education (ABE) and English Speakers of Another Language (ESAL). The vast majority of ESAL adult students are immigrants, like my father, and the vast majority of volunteer tutors want to work with those students. I am drawn to ABE students – those people who fell through the cracks of our very own prized education system, those people the system overlooked and forgot, and in most cases, those people who have been told their entire lives they are stupid or somehow a failure, instead of understanding they are victims of a system that failed them.

The process to become an HLC tutor is long and understandably thorough, complete with background checks, required letters of recommendation and several levels of interviews. The training, however, is very brief (only one day) and heavily geared toward tutors for ESAL students. Had I not been “academically inclined,” I would have floundered more than I did. In fact, I thought I flunked the training when they asked the question, “What do you think is the most important part of literacy?” My answer, of course, was the beauty and value of being able to read and understand ideas and concepts and to be able to share them with others. The “correct” answer was to be able to function in the daily world – write grocery lists, checks, fill out applications, read menus, etc. Yes, they were right, and I got that rude awakening quickly “on the job.” I also had loftier, more idealistic (but not unreasonable) goals – and I still felt both were reachable. I was accepted as a tutor regardless of my answer. Availability sometimes outweighs perfection.

The Tutor Make-Up

Looking around during the training, and listening to other tutor applicants, it’s obvious there is no mold, checklist or “character description” for what is required to be a good tutor. We are all very different and come at this from completely different perspectives. What seems to bring us together is the overwhelming desire to help, a love of the written and spoken word, and a certain naivety that this will be enough and we can actually do this. Very few

of us have any teaching experience in any field, but we all believe we're smart enough to be successful. Our lack of humility is both humorous and stunning!

If I had been able to see just a few short months down the road of my tutoring experience, I would have seen my balloon of naivety, confidence, and idealism burst under the realism of my incredibly self-overestimated abilities and knowledge, and my newfound insecurity and fear which screamed I didn't know what I was doing. With every session now, I feel the importance of the job I have agreed to take on. I do not take my student's trust lightly. I question what it was about each of us that the council felt we could be successful tutors. While I'm sure the "warm body" perspective applies as in any volunteer organization, we are dealing with other human beings' abilities to function and learn. The gravity of our task makes that selection process more important.

Prior to our current environment of isolation, the tutors would get together to share ideas and resources, get advice, and generally learn from each other. We still come from different walks of life, have different backgrounds, education and experiences, and use different methods, tools and resources. What stood out during those meetings, though, is what stood out during our training – what we all still share is our desire to help, our love of words – and our brazen confidence!

We show up and we care. The rest falls into place.

The Initial Tutor/Student Session

The council conducts some outreach for new students, but since the number of students continues to vastly outnumber the availability of tutors, there's always a backlog. Unfortunately, while ESAL students are eager to get help, ABE students often feel shame and don't come forward. Consequently, there are fewer ABE students, and fewer ABE tutors. When a student registers for the program, HLC does an initial assessment of literacy level, life/home/family needs, and student goals. Then they match each student carefully with a tutor. HLC provides workbooks and processes, but again, the materials are heavily geared toward ESAL students. The council, however, is always available to me

for individualized questions and links to resources whenever possible, but success depends solely on how creative and diligent the tutor chooses to be. It has become clear to me that our literacy remediation programs do not adequately address the needs of those students for whom our system failed. Unfortunately, I suspect this is not a local issue.

We meet with our students at our local libraries. This has obviously been an issue because of COVID-19, and I will talk about that a little later when I address those challenges. For the purposes of this writing, I am focusing on one of my students. She is 35 years old, graduated from a Florida high school, and currently works as a department store manager for a large, national retail chain. She has worked for this company for about 10 years, all the while keeping her “secret” about her literacy deficiencies closely held. She has hidden this well over her adult life, demonstrating the fact that not only is she not stupid as she’s been told, but she must be incredibly bright to have functioned so well with the lack of these skills. I am constantly reminding her that the inability to read and write is not an indication of intelligence, but in fact, an indication of unbelievable capability to function in spite of not having those skills – skills which are taught, not inherent.

While her story is very much like other ABE students, her constant struggle and devotion to better herself, her internal motivation, and her inner purpose have made her exemplary. I began my tutoring endeavor with this desire to instill a love of literacy, and I wanted to delve in and fill this student with a love of reading and writing! It became quickly clear to me that my first priority was to instill trust and confidence – trust in me, confidence that I could do the job for her (a job I immediately doubted I could do), confidence in herself, and trust in a system she had every reason to question. It took three months before she smiled or participated more than just doing as she was asked.

A Two-Way Commitment

We start by talking about expectations and understandings. What does she expect from me? What do I expect from her? What is her home and work life like? How much time and energy will she be able to expend? What is her story? How did she get here? Why am I here? What motivated her to start

this program? There are so many questions, but we are really just trying to feel each other's motivations, processes and goals. We're trying to figure out if our souls can touch in this surprisingly intimate life commitment. We're trying to determine if we can walk this process together. I don't come in thinking I am in charge. Neither of us is. I am here to assist. We do, however, establish ground rules – about homework, anonymity, respect, tardiness, cancellations. We know and agree that both of us must keep the commitment. The HLC requires tutors commit a year to the student. I asked the same. I wasn't just signing on to teach her, and she wasn't just signing on to do as told. We were agreeing to go on a journey together.

The Process Isn't Linear. It's Like Driving the Streets of Boston.

My student doesn't live in a vacuum. She has personal issues, family issues, work issues – all of which impact what her literacy needs and priorities are, and that can change with every weekly session. If a tutor thinks they can create a lesson plan and move along it step by step, then they are truly mistaken and they will be increasingly frustrated. Tutoring adults requires flexibility, constantly making adjustments based on what the student is currently facing, always looking for resources and creative ways to make those adjustments. While the workbooks provided are not the best, we still use them, but have adapted the usage to better fit her. For example, while the workbook just requires her to read certain sentences, I read them and have her write them down. She will often read by inference, recognizing a word based on the context of the sentence. Her greater need is to be able to spell those words and recognize how those sentences should be punctuated. So, we've adapted the provided materials to better suit her specific needs. But our work together required more agility on my part.

- To improve her ability to read specific words, versus reading by inference, we read "The Little Prince," by St. Exupery. This book is a translation from French, so the turn of phrase is not to be expected. It requires the reader to read each word, not infer from context.

- When she applied for another job within her company, we worked on formulating answers to specific questions, resume writing, spelling work-related words and interviewing skills.
- When she was with a group of friends at a restaurant, ordered her dinner and got something she didn't expect, we worked on reading menus.
- When I discovered that she couldn't write a grocery list and just memorized what she needed, we worked on spelling those items she typically bought. Given the fact that I can't remember anything that I haven't written down, I was truly impressed by her ability, a clear coping mechanism, to memorize an entire list like this.
- When she was going through a difficult personal time, we worked on journaling and we read The Bible, again another book that cannot be read by inferring from context.
- When COVID-19 hit and major issues were facing our country, I sent her weekly thought-provoking questions and asked her to write a paragraph on how she felt about it.
- When she expressed a need for a more creative outlet, we studied and had her write various forms of poetry. I was drawing on my own education that expression sometimes required different forms.
- When her new job required her to speak in front of others, we made sure to include more reading-out-loud time, to increase her confidence in speaking. Because her company was going through major changes, requiring her to understand change from different perspectives, we chose to read "Who Moved My Cheese?" by Spencer Johnson.

These are just a few examples of how our sessions have taken twists and turns. If you've ever driven the streets of Boston, you understand why they say, "You can't get there from here." You have to make five lefts, two rights and go around three rotaries, just the make the simple right turn you should have been able to make a mile back. That's what it's like.

Tutoring adults is not like teaching children. Not only do they learn differently, but it is our job as tutors to give them the tools they need – today – while recognizing and being prepared for the next time when their needs will most likely change, at the same time maintaining a forward direction and some level of consistency. I thought tutoring would be about instilling a love of communications and how that would improve her life. The HLC thought it was about practical literacy functionality. We were both wrong and we were both right. *It's about providing the tools to navigate life in a more profound and meaningful way.*

When COVID-19 changed our lives, we had to make even more changes.

Losing the In-Person Format

Along with every other teacher and student around the world, we lost the ability to do in-person learning when COVID-19 ransacked our country. I now haven't physically seen my student since early March. While schools and educational systems were able to switch to online (with varying degrees of success), that wasn't so easy with my student.

Like students whose families are technologically challenged, both in equipment and expertise, my student did not have a computer. Her smart phone completely filled her day-to-day technology needs and interests. When you understand that a typical ABE student often avoids more in-depth or lengthy written communications (both reading and writing) because of their insecurities, you see why my student stuck with her phone and didn't move further to use a laptop. Also, if you've ever tried to fill out paperwork, write more than a brief text, or read more than a brief item, you realize that you cannot conduct on-line learning with a smart phone.

However, since the only technology available to us was a phone, we decided to use it in the best way possible and we began weekly phone calls. Over the last nine months, I've discovered that this lack of face-to-face interaction gave her a sort of anonymity and increased her confidence in speaking and reading out loud. Instead of just writing down her spelling words, she spells them back to me. We read books together, each of us with our own copy, and her ability to

sound out words and read smoothly has drastically improved. We discuss general world and civic topics, and she is much more proficient at putting together and expressing her thoughts. Although there are some functional areas of literacy that we can't work on as efficiently, we are using this time as best we can and her overall improvement is amazing.

There are times, however, when I feel as though I am working blindly. I'm sure many teachers feel this way without that in-person connection to their students. I can't control her environment, eliminate distractions or provide the same resources. There are some students who excel at an on-line learning environment, and some who simply do not have the personality or ability to do so and need a more personal approach. It is my belief that most adult learners, whether they are ABE or ESAL students, are inherently not as suited to on-line classes and have struggled and lost ground with the current COVID-19 restrictions. These ABE students would have been the same children who are struggling with online learning today.

So, Where are We Now?

I've been with this student for a little more than two years now, almost half of which has been hindered by the inability to meet in person. What has been the outcome? What have we accomplished? What have we both learned?

Yes, we focused on basic needs that most of us would be amazed that a functioning adult would not know how to do. Among other things, my student learned how to:

- Write out numbers so that she could write a check
- Read a bill
- Make a grocery list
- Write a business email or report
- Read a menu
- Fill out an application or medical forms
- Read street signs
- Respond to an email or text

While some of this was done by rote learning, we focused mainly on learning to read and spell words phonetically. As anyone who speaks English fluently knows, for every word that can be spelled or sounded out phonetically according to our many rules, there are thousands that break those rules. As a tutor, it's frustrating to give a student a rule, and show her how many times it will be broken. But that's the English language!

If you ask me, though, what the bigger impact has been on my student, I will tell you that it goes much farther than phonetics. Over the last two years, she has grown tremendously.

- She has a greater confidence in her literacy abilities
- Her overall confidence in herself has grown exponentially
- She is more eager to join a conversation and express her views
- Her diction or patois has greatly improved, leaving her more comfortable and better able to speak in front of others
- Her desire and interest in learning has been sparked
- She has a greater value in the written word and what it can offer her

But probably well beyond the typical literacy issues is that my role has become more of a coach – a coach of anything that comes up in her life. I'm okay with this because, if you remember, my original belief was that literacy was about sharing ideas, concepts and feelings. So, if my student is expressing herself, her ideas, her beliefs, her goals, I am doing my job. I am encouraging literacy in whatever form it takes.

A Life in the Day

When asked what I learned early on about being a tutor, my first response was my new appreciation for how difficult the English language is. We have rules that are constantly broken; many words come from other languages; words that are spelled the same are sounded completely differently. English was not my first language either. My family spoke French until I went to school. Still, I saw that a language I learned at a young age, and assimilated gradually within a family who believed in the importance of language, was much easier to learn

while young. I commend my student for doing the work at this point in her life.

Perhaps more importantly, though, what I learned was what it took to be an adult tutor and what would make one “successful.” I learned that every single session with my student required me to bring my entire life into those sessions – my own education, my experiences, my personality, my strengths, and yes, my own weaknesses. In essence, my entire life was brought into one day of tutoring with my student. I’m sure our teachers do this as well. You can’t just follow the workbooks and do the exercises. You have to incorporate everything you are and be able to use that and relate it to your students’ needs. Your whole life is represented in each tutoring session. I can’t think of anything I could do that would be more life-fulfilling than that.

As my Dad said:

Our world revolves around science, math and language. Science will teach us to be curious about our world; math will teach us to reason logically.

But the true beauty, wonder and awe lies in our ability to communicate and share what we’ve learned.

Thank you, Dad.