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# Investigating Adult Literacy Programs through Community Engagement Research: A Case Study

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# Investigating Adult Literacy Programs through Community Engagement Research: A Case Study

*Jaclyn M. Wells*

This article presents findings from a case study of an adult literacy program. The author conducted this IRB-approved study as part of a three-year, research-based, community-engagement project that partnered the literacy program with a writing center at a large public research university. The author argues that the participatory methods afforded by community-engagement research can allow researchers to achieve insight into particular programs while contributing to local literacy. The author also argues that understanding the characteristics of particular programs can contribute to knowledge of the field of adult literacy education and help collaborators develop engagement projects that support adult literacy.

## Introduction: The Complexity of Adult Literacy

In "The Challenges Facing Adult Literacy Programs," Daphne Greenberg describes the complexity of adult literacy. She writes: "This complexity is reflected by the heterogeneity of the people who are served, the skill levels addressed, the contexts in which literacy is taught, and the settings where the programs are housed" (39). Such complexity, Greenberg argues, creates many challenges to adult literacy programs. More research about adult literacy programs could provide educators, community and university partners, and other stakeholders a better understanding of such programs and ultimately drive improvements to adult literacy education. However, the very complexity of adult literacy programs may present challenges to designing and conducting in-depth studies. Many of the characteristics Greenberg cites, such as the part-time and temporary status of instructors and students, may challenge research design and implementation. The limited resources, time, and staff of adult literacy programs may also make research difficult.

These challenges may explain the dearth of research about adult literacy programs, as well as why so much existing research relies primarily on quantitative methods that do not require long-term or significant relationships with research participants. Unfortunately, common types of research methods, such as quantitative program assessments, may not capture the full story of adult literacy education. In *Back to School: Why Everyone Deserves a Second Chance at Education*, Mike Rose argues that

"second-chance" institutions like community colleges and adult education programs are often misunderstood by traditional assessment measures, and that this lack of understanding can threaten their funding, improvement, and even existence.

Case studies about specific adult literacy programs can provide a more in-depth understanding of the complex realities of adult students, teachers, and learning settings. Case study methods, however, present their own challenges, not the least being the time and commitment required of research participants. When potential research participants are as short on time and resources as teachers and administrators in adult literacy programs, qualitative methods like case study become particularly difficult. Further, high turnover among teachers and students in such programs may create challenges to engaging them in long-term studies. Even when participants in these programs are available to take part in case study research, the benefit for them and their programs may be nonexistent or trivial. Finally, researchers like university faculty may have such little understanding of these programs that they design research projects that are unrealistic or insensitive to the realities of adult literacy programs or do not benefit the teachers, students, or programs involved.

I argue that community-engagement research can address many of the challenges to designing and conducting case studies about adult literacy programs. When researchers are already engaged with an adult literacy program in a long-term partnership, they are better positioned to earn research participants' trust and design a study that is sensitive to the program's constraints and characteristics. Perhaps more importantly, research that is tied to community-engagement projects offers the possibility for the kind of reciprocity or mutual benefits discussed by service-learning scholars like Ellen Cushman and Dirk Remley. The potential for reciprocity is particularly strong when the research informs and improves the engagement project itself, thus providing a better experience, product, or collaboration for the community partner. Scholars such as Ellen Cushman (2002), Michelle Simmons and Jeffrey Grabill (2007), and Linda Flower (2008) suggest that research can improve community-university partnerships by informing program design, working toward sustainability, and investigating the effectiveness of community-engagement projects. In short, integrating research and engagement can ensure that the community partners reap the benefits of the research. Finally, the research itself may be stronger when connected to engagement, as teachers, students, and/or administrators in the adult literacy program act as active research *participants* instead of as passive research *subjects*.

As an example of such research, I offer a case study of a community adult literacy program. I conducted an IRB-approved investigation of this program as part of a three-year, research-based, community-engagement project that partnered the Purdue University Writing Lab with a local adult literacy program and a workforce-development program. I developed and sustained the engagement project for three years in collaboration with Allen Brizee[1]. I begin the article with a brief background of the engagement project to provide context for the research methodology. In the second section, I describe this methodology. I emphasize how using participatory methods and directly tying research to engagement addressed challenges to researching adult literacy programs, allowed participants to drive the research, and created a fuller picture of the program than could be gained through less participatory or less action-oriented methods. Third, I discuss the research findings, which are organized by the major characteristics of the program that emerged from a substantive analysis of the data (Maxwell 2005). While adult literacy programs are diverse, I argue that these characteristics can provide insight into the strategies, contexts, and constraints of adult literacy education.





## The CWEST: A Community-University Partnership

Started in spring 2007, the Community Writing and Education Station (CWEST)[2] partners the Purdue University Writing Lab with two organizations: the Lafayette Adult Resource Academy (LARA), a local adult literacy program, and WorkOne, a state-based employment organization[3] that is locally aligned with LARA. Brizee and I began developing the project after discovering our mutual interest in community engagement, adult education, and community-based research. The project's primary result or "product" is a section of the university writing center's online writing lab (OWL) that contains free literacy materials for adult students and teachers. The materials address the three areas most commonly studied at the adult literacy program, according to LARA's teachers and administrators: the General Educational Development (GED) exam, workplace literacy and job search preparation, and English as a Second Language. Even though Brizee and I have since graduated and moved to different institutions, this adult education section of the Purdue OWL remains online and will be updated regularly by writing center staff, as the entire OWL is. In this sense, the project remains ongoing, even though the original partnership that created, researched, and revised the materials has concluded.

Based on our experiences, observations, and reading, Brizee and I approached this project knowing that many well-intentioned attempts at service learning and community engagement fail, leave community members with little benefit, and actually damage the very university-community relationships they seek to improve. When designing the CWEST, Brizee and I considered the many calls in engagement and service-learning scholarship for better community-based work. First, the project responds to arguments for sustainable, mutually beneficial, and collaborative community engagement in which university and community members exchange expertise and work toward mutual goals (Flower and Heath; Cushman; Flower). Second, the project responds to warnings about community-based work that is inappropriate to the university and community context (Grabill and Gaillet; Amare and Grettano), or that positions the community as "other" (Coogan; Edbauer). Third, the project answers calls for community engagement that is informed by research (Cushman; Goldblatt and Parks; Simmons and Grabill; Flower). We hoped that research would foster more effective collaboration between the university and community groups; we also hoped the research findings would create a better product, the adult education section of the online writing lab, for local and national use.

Perhaps most important to the CWEST is its collaborative approach to developing ideas and solving problems. In *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement*, Linda Flower argues that one option for addressing philosophical and social tensions in community partnerships is to approach the work with a "spirit of inquiry." Adopting a spirit of inquiry, she argues, requires us to move beyond the postures of care and critique that have long dominated community engagement and that have cast community participants in a passive recipient role. Approaching community engagement with a spirit of inquiry respects the expertise and views of university and community participants. Thus, it allows both partners an active role in the project, which includes addressing inevitable tensions collaboratively. Flower writes that a spirit of inquiry "cannot only acknowledge some deep-running differences in how people define the problems and goals on which a collaboration is based but can embrace the difficulties of entering a cultural contact zone" (103). In the project, the spirit of inquiry—of raising and addressing questions collaboratively—pervaded the work from beginning to conclusion but was perhaps most formalized in the empirical research that informed the partnership and its products.

## Community Engagement Research and Adult Literacy Programs

The study raised one major research question: What are the needs, goals, available resources, and teaching practices of teachers in the adult literacy program[4]? I sought this knowledge collaboratively with the teachers themselves to develop and improve the engagement project and its major product—the adult education section of the Purdue Online Writing Lab. The research methodology was shaped by this continuous connection between research and engagement, a connection that sparked a radical departure from traditions like researcher detachment from participants and findings. This connection meant, for example, that I had a close and ongoing relationship with the research participants, as they had been involved in the engagement project from its earliest stages. Additionally, the connection between research and engagement meant that the research participants and I had an immediate investment in the findings and their application. Specifically, we hoped that these findings would help to improve the engagement project, the OWL materials, and adult literacy education locally, all of which we cared about tremendously. The close relationship between the researcher and research participants and the mutual investment in the research findings was not simply a natural byproduct of researching an engagement project. Instead, the relationships and investment were strategic elements of the research methodology. The idea, in short, was that an ongoing, mutually beneficial relationship between the researcher and research participants and a productive connection between engagement and research would improve the research process and outcomes.

First, the research methodology was grounded by the same general philosophy of university-community collaboration that guided the entire engagement project. The methodology follows the philosophy of university-community collaboration that Strand et al. offer in *Community-Based Research and Higher Education*. The authors describe community-based research (CBR) as "a partnership of students, faculty, and community members who collaboratively engage in research with the purposes of solving a pressing community problem or effecting social change" (3). The study engages community members as collaborative research partners to solve a specific problem, the lack of free online adult basic literacy resources. This lack was a "pressing community problem," as teachers at LARA and WorkOne were limited in resources they could use to work with students. With nearly no free online resources appropriate for GED preparation, for example, the teachers were restricted to using donated materials, general online writing resources, and what few published GED preparation materials they could purchase with the program's small budget. Further, while it is beyond the scope of this article to theorize fully why free online resources for adult literacy were lacking before the CWEST, the deficiency may be due to the lower status of adult basic education and the adult students who regularly use such "second-chance" institutions (Rose). The CWEST attempted to elevate the status of these programs by including a large adult literacy section in an internationally recognized university online writing lab; in this sense, the research sought to effect social change beyond the local context. Importantly, solving the community problem and creating social change necessitated collaboration between the university and community, neither of whom had the expertise to do the work without the other.

While the broader relationship between the university and community is important to the research methodology, equally so is the relationship between the individual researcher and research participants. The research methodology is designed to avoid treating community members as research *subjects* and move toward a more collaborative research model in which the community members act as research *participants* who contribute to knowledge-making. As Ellen Cushman suggests, community-based research should parallel the engaged approach to community partnerships: if the goal of such partnerships is to work with—not for—the community, then the goal of research about the partnerships should be to create knowledge with—not about—the community. Further, the research should benefit the community members. My research methodologies follow Cushman's activist research approach—to create knowledge with the research participants, and further, to create knowledge that will benefit community members. This approach does not simply make best use of the community members' expertise (an important goal in itself) but also makes better use of the research participants' limited time. When community participants enjoy tangible benefits from research, such as improved resources or access to services, their involvement is time better spent.

The research benefitted community participants in immediate and more far-reaching ways because of its relationship with the engagement project. The research immediately benefitted community participants by providing free online instructional materials that teachers and students in the local adult literacy program could use day-to-day. Because the materials had been developed and researched with the teachers, they reflected the program's needs, goals, and teaching strategies better than materials

that had been developed by outsiders. A second benefit, perhaps less immediate but equally important, is that the community participants contributed to adult literacy education far beyond the local context by using their expertise and time to develop and research the online materials. The participants, all dedicated teachers, regularly expressed pride and enthusiasm that they could contribute their expertise to help teachers and students worldwide by filling this major gap in free online adult literacy resources.

As these benefits suggest, the research was ultimately geared toward improving the community-university partnership and its products. The research methodology aligns with the model of action research described by education researcher Patricia H. Hinchey, who specifies that action research "is conducted by those inside a community" and that the research "leads to an action plan, which frequently generates a new cycle of the process" (4). Although not a member of the adult literacy program, I functioned as a community insider in the engagement project. Further, as the research progressed, the participants and I generated constant revisions to the instructional materials. We also generated and addressed new questions following Flowers' model of collaborative inquiry. Greenwood and Levin argue that action research methods like those proposed by Hinchey and collaborative inquiry proposed by Flower can improve university-community relationships. The authors argue the importance of collaboratively identifying and solving problems, as well as collaboratively assessing solutions: "Whether the 'problem' is a social/organizational or material one, the results of action research must be tangible in the sense that the participants can figure out whether or not the solution they have developed actually resolves the problem they set themselves" (150). The research methodology is grounded in this idea that action research can improve the relationship between the community and university by creating valuable knowledge with clear applications.

To investigate my research question, I conducted case studies of four teachers who volunteered for the study after Brizee and I presented at a staff meeting of the program. The case study approach follows the research model presented by Malicky et al. in "Literacy Learning in a Community-Based Program." The authors present case studies of five students in a community literacy program. Although Malicky et al. focus on students, their rationale for case study extends to adult education teachers. Like their students, these teachers are often part-time and bring diverse backgrounds and approaches to the work. Case study allowed me to gain an in-depth understanding of each instructor's perspective, and focusing on four instructors instead of just one or two allowed me to see a greater diversity of perspectives and teaching methods. Each case study consisted of interviews and teaching observations with the instructor[5]. After completing teaching observations and one-on-one interviews with all four instructors, I led a focus group with all of them to get feedback on the first online writing lab materials that were drafted, the preparation materials for the GED exam. The focus group provided a useful transition to the second round of interviews and teaching observations, which focused more directly on gaining feedback on the OWL materials. While this second round of research is not the focus of the present article, it is important to understand that the research overall was aimed at gaining information about the engagement project and its products. Finally, I collected relevant program artifacts to better understand what I gained from interviews and observations.

Data analysis also reflected a participatory approach. My major research question[6] provided the initial set of categories used to code interview and observation data: as I coded, I looked for clues about the needs, goals, available resources, and teaching practices of teachers in the program. Next, I analyzed the data further using substantive categories, which Maxwell describes as "primarily descriptive, in a broad sense that includes description of participants' concepts and beliefs" (97). Specifically, the substantive categories emerged from the major characteristics of the adult literacy program that the participants themselves identified during interviews. These characteristics also provide the organization for the section that follows. Thus, the participants not only shaped data analysis, but also the presentation of research findings.

## A Picture of an Adult Literacy Program

### *Literacy Education as a Community Need: "An Image of Community Action and Development"*[7]

The connection between literacy and community drives much of LARA's work. Findings indicate first that the program seeks to lead community improvement and second, that teachers in the program see literacy as crucial to such improvement. For the program and the teachers in it, literacy is not just about improved reading, writing, or computer skills but extends to broader social and economic issues like poverty, unemployment, crime, and drug abuse.

My first interview was with Ann[8], who at the time of the interview had taught at LARA for 30 years and also served as the program's assistant director. Like all of the teachers I interviewed, Ann commented frequently on the program's role in the community, and she argued passionately that literacy education is central to community improvement. Toward the beginning of the interview, Ann remarked: "when you're talking about language literacy, it doesn't get much more basic than that for the needs of your community. If your community is illiterate or a certain population of it is, then the whole community suffers."

Within the same conversation, Ann commented on the neighborhood surrounding LARA's building, emphasizing the area's high crime rate, the number of sexual predators and returning convicts who live there, and the prevalence of drugs:

> This…neighborhood has the most sexual predators in the city and secondly the two zip codes ----- and -----, which have the highest crime rates in this area. As well as, the highest number of folks coming out of jail and back into the community…We've got crack houses right across the street and dealers, drug traffickers right next door to us.

Despite Ann's long history in the community and program, one might question her claims, perhaps even using facts and figures to demonstrate that a neighborhood a mile away from LARA has a higher crime rate, more registered sex offenders, and a higher percentage of residents who are just returning from prison. However, the certainty of Ann's claims about the surrounding neighborhood is less important than her *perception* that the neighborhood's characteristics are relevant to the program. To Ann, it matters that LARA is situated in a troubled neighborhood, since community improvement is a central mission of the program. As Ann's remarks suggest, this mission includes addressing problems like drugs and crime through improved literacy. Ann directly stated these goals at the very end of the interview, when she said: "We would like our school building to be a beacon […] we are trying to portray an image of community action and development right here in the […] neighborhood."

LARA's official mission statement reflects this commitment to community improvement through literacy education. The mission statement reads: "In order to increase learners' capacities to make productive, ongoing changes in their personal lives, society, and public policy, our mission is to teach academic and life skills and provide for the expansion of life views" (Volunteer Training Manual). The connection between the personal and the public is important. In the official mission statement and in Ann's take on that statement, the message is the same: work at LARA does not shape individuals in isolation of each other, but instead, shapes the neighborhood and communities in which they exist. Additionally, the mission statement suggests that this work does not shape individuals in isolation from the rest of their lives; rather, it encompasses the academic, professional, and personal.

## *Non-Traditional Student Populations: "Our Learners Are at the Bottom"*

Although specific findings about LARA's student population are beyond the scope of this study, the research does offer insight into the teachers' perceptions of the students. Findings also suggest the effect these perceptions have on the program's work. Specifically, findings suggest teachers' sensitivity to students' non-academic lives, lives that may be more complicated, challenging, and unstable than those of traditional student populations. Further, findings suggest that the program is structured to accommodate the students' lives instead of drawing firm boundaries between the academic and personal.

I return to my discussion of LARA's place and space to illustrate how the program anticipates and acknowledges students' potential personal challenges. In the previous section, I suggest that Ann's comments about the program's *place*—specifically, its location in a poor neighborhood alongside crack houses and dive bars—are significant to the program's role in the community. The program's interior—the nature of its *space*—suggests much about its student population and the program's role in their lives.

My teaching observations took place in LARA's main learning lab[9], a large room where most of the program's instruction happens. The room contains around 30 desks facing a large whiteboard, like in a typical classroom. Several computer stations, larger tables for group work, and bookshelves line the room's walls. During the teaching observations, I noted the number of flyers and posters displayed prominently throughout the learning lab. Many of these flyers and posters addressed social issues like drug addiction, while others advertised financial assistance and family programs. The front whiteboard alone displayed two posters about the dangers of methamphetamine addiction, a flyer with information about a women's crisis center, and an advertisement for a clothing drive at a local high school.

Perhaps a few anti-meth posters and some flyers about domestic violence and assistance programs do not seem that significant. However, when we compare the flyers and posters in LARA's learning lab to the flyers and posters hanging in the Purdue Writing Lab, the significance becomes clear. A visitor finds no anti-drug poster in the Writing Lab, nor does s/he find a poster with information on women's crisis support. Instead, visitors see photos of staff members, flyers advertising study abroad programs and other academic opportunities, and posters describing writing rules and strategies. The physical contrast is clear: the posters and flyers displayed in their physical space suggest that the university writing center's sphere is largely—if not solely—academic, whereas the community adult literacy program's sphere extends to the personal. Further, the more specific subjects of the many posters and flyers in LARA's learning lab suggest that the learners' personal lives are potentially influenced by such issues as drug addiction, domestic violence, and poverty.

Program artifacts also suggest that students face personal challenges that LARA teachers must acknowledge. The Individual Learner Record (ILR) provides an example. The ILR, a document used to record the student's work from the beginning of his or her enrollment at LARA, reflects many of the same issues implied by the learning lab's flyers and posters. On the ILR's first page, teachers can note if the student is a displaced homemaker, a single parent, or dislocated worker. They can also note if the learner receives public assistance, such as food stamps, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), or refugee cash assistance. Finally, teachers are to record if the student is a resident of a correctional institution, a community correctional program, or a medical, group, or nursing home. The ILR suggests that many students in the program face financial, legal, and personal issues. That these issues are recorded in the ILR illustrates that they are viewed as relevant to the students' academic work.

During interviews, the teachers explained that many students have complicated personal backgrounds that influence their academic lives. Further, the interview findings suggest that both the program and teachers are committed to working within the context of these backgrounds. All interview participants discussed how students' personal lives influence their academic success, generally in response to questions about teaching practices and the program's day-to-day processes. When asked about her teaching practices, Ann described some potential issues that students face and commented that these issues can interfere with their studies: "I mean how can women concentrate when their kids have been taken away from them and the courts? They're facing the courts, fighting with their spouses, fighting with their landlords. You know,

just a bunch of things that are going on." Ann went on to discuss the limited availability of the program's voluntary counselor, who she described as a "liaison between LARA and the community." Ann's comment substantiates her other points about the program's relationship with the community. She views the counselor as not only helping individual students but also contributing to LARA's broader goals of community improvement through literacy education. Unfortunately, the counselor's voluntary and part-time status may mean that the teachers have to act as counselors as well, a concern that was voiced by all four teachers.

The program's schedule, class structure, and enrollment are also influenced by the students' personal lives. Like many community-based literacy organizations, LARA is open entry-open exit, which means that students begin and end their work as they choose. In interviews, all of the teachers explained that financial and personal factors often interrupt students' study at LARA. The open entry-open exit system allows students to resume study when they are able. Ann articulates the philosophy behind this approach: "We are in the philosophy that we want to capture you when you can come […] So we are open entry-open exit." As Ann's comment suggests, LARA is structured so that students can come and go and that the program's very philosophy is one of accommodation with the students' lives.

## *Individualized, Pragmatic Teaching Strategies: "Whatever Works, Works"*

Partly because of the open entry-open exit system, LARA does not hold traditional classes in which students work as a group on the same subjects. Instead, curriculum is tailored to students' specific goals and needs, and students often study independently with the teachers' input. Students come to the program for a variety of reasons, including preparing for the GED exam, developing workplace literacy skills, improving family and life skills literacy, and studying English as a second language. Since even students in the same general area will have different needs and skill levels, students in the learning lab on any given day will be studying widely different topics. Further, students come to the program with diverse learning styles, backgrounds, and attitudes toward education. The findings suggest that this diversity greatly affects teaching practices in the program and that the teachers respond to the diversity by using individualized strategies that emphasize the pragmatic or "real world."

During my observation of Alice, 26 students were present in LARA's learning lab. To begin the day's session, Alice wrote her name and the names of the three other teachers present on the board and listed five to seven student names below each of them. Alice later explained to me that she had assigned students to teachers based on their area of study. She explained that teachers work with students one-on-one in the learning lab, but working with a group of students who are all studying the same general area helps to provide some cohesion to each teacher's day.

Alice worked with six students who were preparing for the GED. The students worked independently, but she checked in regularly to monitor progress and offer





help. Her interaction with one student, Sean, illustrates the degree to which regular assessment drives individualized pedagogy. When Alice sat down with Sean, she reminded him that he scored the lowest on the math portion of his practice exam. Even more specifically, she noted, he seemed to struggle with fractions. Because he was struggling with that area, Alice directed Sean to the fractions part of the Pre-GED Interactive computer program. In many interactions, Alice identified the specific area the student needed to study and directed him or her to it, just as she did with Sean.

The teachers' individualized teaching strategies stem directly from certain characteristics of the adult student population, like their busy lives, previous educational experiences, and attitudes toward school. When asked about her teaching, Alice emphasized efficiency:

> We usually start off with assessment and the students are usually pretty receptive to that because we tell them what we do and then we find out where all your needs are and you know we are going to get you through this process as efficiently as possible.

Alice's dedication to efficiency likely comes from her understanding that adult students juggle many other responsibilities and have limited time, as the Volunteer Training Manual describes. The teachers also described collaboration and transparency in lesson planning. Ann said: "I tell new people, 'Give me a week to work with you, let's try out what is best for you. Some of the things we try aren't going to work well but that tells us that this is not your style of learning.'" Creating lessons collaboratively with students and communicating openly with them may help the teachers manage the students' past experiences and attitudes toward school. Ann anticipates frustration and encourages persistence by assuring students that the strategies that do not work for them simply do not suit their learning style. Joan most directly connected individualized pedagogy with students' past problems in school by explaining, "You gotta kinda come at it with a different attitude and such because [the students] haven't been successful in the school setting. And that is why we do individualized plans."

The teachers often use a combination of directive instruction and guided independent study with students. Ann's interaction with one student, Amy, illustrates how teachers combine directive methods with independent study. At the beginning of my observation, Amy worked independently, studying for the social studies portion of the GED with an exam preparation book. While she was studying, Ann approached her briefly to drill her on multiplication tables. After Amy rattled off the "threes," Ann praised her, said they would work on "fours" next, and approached another student while Amy returned to her social studies book. After Amy had been working independently for nearly an hour, Ann approached her again. This time, she drilled Amy on her fours and then fives, and after Amy completed both successfully, Ann praised her again and said they would work on sixes next week. She then asked Amy if she would like to move on from social studies to work on keyboarding at a computer.

During my observation of Elaine, I witnessed a similar combination of directive instruction and guided independent study in teaching writing. At the beginning of the observation, one student, Sam, was doing grammar exercises on the computer. After he finished an exercise on homonyms, Elaine approached him to check his work. For each incorrect answer, she briefly explained his mistake. After providing this directive instruction, Elaine left Sam to work on his own again, this time on drafting a paragraph. Sam worked independently for nearly the rest of the observation, until Elaine approached him at the end to look at what he had written. They read over the paragraph together, and Elaine praised the strong parts of the paragraph, corrected some grammar errors, and offered suggestions for improvement. While Elaine was not working with Sam, she was walking around the learning lab working with other students, and her instruction followed a similar pattern of checking their independent work, explaining mistakes and offering encouragement, and guiding them toward further independent study.

The specific strategies teachers use often draw on students' existing knowledge and experiences. When I asked Joan to describe some of her teaching strategies, she indicated that she refers to real-world concepts to draw upon what students already know and appeal to their interests. She said: "I had one guy who doesn't like anything and it was math and it was percents. I was like, "Hey you know that CD you have in your CD player there? Don't you wanna know if you are going to the store if you are going to get a good deal? Does it say you are going to save 20%?"" The other teachers described similar strategies and emphasized the importance of tapping into students' existing knowledge, skills, and interests and building their confidence by showing them what they already know. Alice described some of the options for working with a student on the GED essay. She described many strategies that I witnessed in the learning lab, including drafting practice essays, brainstorming ideas with a tutor, and trading essays with a peer.

Elaine expressed many of the same opinions as Ann, Alice, and Joan about the diversity of teaching strategies used in the program and the importance of matching these strategies to students. However, Elaine hinted at disagreement among teachers about teaching strategies. When asked about her methods for helping students prepare for the GED essay, Elaine remarked:

> […] we have them do the webbing first, of course because a lot of these people never think to do some kind of a quick organization of their ideas or webbing. I absolutely don't agree with the outline form that the morning [learning lab] uses. Because there is no way that you can develop such an elaborate outline when you are writing a GED [essay].

Elaine's comments remind us that, just like teachers in any context, teachers of adult literacy will not always agree on the best teaching strategies. Also interesting are the *reasons* behind Elaine's disagreement. She questions the value of teaching students outlines because she believes outlining is unrealistic in the exam's time frame. Elaine's





response suggests her commitment to preparing students for a specific experience, in this case, the essay part of the GED exam. This relates to the program's mission of meeting students' individual needs, as well as the teachers' dedication to using the students' time efficiently and respecting their goals.

### *Variety of Resources: "We Need a lot of Things at Our Fingertips"*

To support its individualized curriculum, LARA requires a variety of instructional resources. All four research participants noted during the interviews that they not only use a variety of resources, but that they actually *need* many kinds of resources at their disposal to support a diversity of student learning needs, styles, and preferences. During observations, I witnessed a variety of resources in use.

LARA's materials can be placed into a number of different categories. First, the teachers all indicated that resources include both published and teacher-created materials. Published materials include resources like textbooks and GED preparation guides. Teacher-created materials include short handouts with writing tips or sample writing. Materials can also be categorized according digital versus print. Though there are far more print materials available, the program does have two major computer programs for GED preparation: the Pre-GED Interactive and GED Interactive. Both programs are loaded onto program computers, so they do not require students to be online. A third way to categorize the available resources—and particularly the writing resources—is by whether they are directly connected to a standardized test. Many of the resources are specifically geared toward Pre-GED or GED preparation, but others cover general reading and writing skills, such as grammar and paragraphing.

All four teachers indicated that they use published materials with students, but that the resources get worn out quickly and are expensive to replace. Additionally, Alice pointed out in her interview that print resources become outdated over time. She described a paragraphing textbook that contains many paragraphs for students to model, but noted that the outdated content of the paragraphs can turn students off: "Some of the stuff that they are reading about [in the model paragraphs] is, oh my goodness, you know…you might as well be chiseling it out of stone." Despite problems that the teachers noted with published materials like textbooks and test preparation guides, these were the most commonly used resources during teaching observations.

All four teachers described using computer-based materials with students. They praised their two major digital resources, the Pre-GED and GED Interactive, for their interactivity and ability to track student work. Despite the advantages of the available GED preparation software, the instructors noted that the success of such programs depends largely upon students' comfort level with computers. In my observations, I regularly saw teachers *ask* students if they wanted to work on the computer; students were never required or even strongly directed to do so, probably because of this perspective that not all students in the program are comfortable with computers.

Interviews suggested that the choice of print or digital materials constitutes only one part of matching resources to student preferences. Alice's comments about

choosing appropriate resources for the individual student are representative of many of the teachers' comments:

> We find out that those tactile, kinesthetic people who are the ones who are going to be hard to stay focused are going to need more one-on-one with computer-assisted instruction. Or some of our focused, mature individuals who have strengths in reading and writing, just getting them hooked up with the right textbooks works.

Alice's comments suggest that the diversity of students who attend LARA create a need for a diversity of resources. Additionally, Alice's comments suggest that one of the teacher's major roles is to figure out what resources will be most useful to each student.

Observations support interview findings that teachers use a variety of teaching resources and that they place a high value on matching the instructional resources to students. During observations of Ann and Joan, students used Pre-GED and GED preparation books, the Pre-GED and GED Interactive software, calculators, printed practice GED tests, and scrap paper. During Elaine's observation, students used all of these resources, and one also used Microsoft Word to compose a paragraph. During Alice's observation, two students also used paragraphing textbooks that were not specifically geared toward the GED. Alice also used the official GED essay rubric and referred directly to it when offering feedback on a student's essay. Choosing resources is a collaborative process between the teacher and student, as an interaction between Alice and her student, Ned, illustrates. When Ned began his day at the learning lab, he reminded Alice that he preferred to work at the computer, and she set him up on the GED Interactive program. After Ned worked independently for an hour, Alice checked on his progress. She encouraged him to shift his focus to math, and she opened that part of the GED Interactive for him. Ned and Alice's interaction showed the process of collaborative decision-making—she allowed Ned to work at the computer like he wanted but directed him on what areas to study.

## *Assessments, Documentation, and Funding: "It's All about Goals and Outcomes"*

A final characteristic of LARA is the importance of articulating goals and assessing and documenting progress. In observations, I witnessed that these practices form major parts of LARA's day-to-day activity, and I learned in interviews that they have both pedagogical and administrative motivations. Specifically, documenting goals and progress relate directly to the program's funding, an administrative concern, while the need for constant assessment and documentation greatly affects pedagogy.

Documenting goals and outcomes happens mainly within the Individual Learning Record that I discuss in previous sections. During every observation, I witnessed teachers regularly refer to and record in the ILR. The first page of the document asks basic demographic and contact information, employment and education status, and





some financial information that I describe earlier in the article. The second page of the ILR contains student reasons for attending the program and scores for pre-tests and post-tests. The third page contains space to record the student's primary and secondary goals and achievements, as well as a section to record reasons why a student left the program if s/he left before completing the recorded goals. Finally, there is space to record multiple entry and exit dates, as well as hours of study completed on these dates.

The ILR shows how important assessment and documentation are within LARA. The major parts of the ILR indicate that a high value is placed on assessing student skill levels, articulating primary and secondary goals, and recording achievements. Furthermore, these primary goals and achievements are fairly specific: enter, improve, or retain employment; obtain high school diploma or pass GED; or enroll in postsecondary or professional education. The secondary goals are somewhat less specific and include increased involvement with children's literacy or community activities. The ILR also illustrates the program's open entry-open exit structure. This structure may make documentation even more important; since students come and go, it is essential to have a record of their work.

As LARA's assistant director, Ann has the most significant administrative role of the four participants. Not surprisingly, she had the most to say about how teachers must document goals and progress in order to keep funding. She claimed that government funding drives meticulous documentation of student skill levels, goals, and outcomes and that over the years, the documentation required to secure government funding has increased. Ann also noted that articulating goals and documenting progress is a tricky process, since the teachers feel pressure to articulate the number of goals that will produce the most desirable ratio of goals to achievements in the program's reports. She remarked: "It's so screwy because if we haven't marked a goal but we have an accomplishment, we don't get to count it." If a student gets a job while studying at LARA, for example, but did not mark "Enter Employment" on the ILR when beginning study, the program cannot report the achievement. At the same time, teachers must be careful to not mark too many goals, because the achievement quota they must meet to obtain government funding is based on a ratio of achievements met to goals articulated.

The program also uses testing to assess student learning. Again, the testing ties directly to funding. Ann described how this affects her teaching:

> [...] if we don't get level gains on standardized tests, then the government has gone to that we just don't get reimbursed. So I have that in the back of my mind as well that I want to serve their [the students'] needs and I want them to learn for the situations that they have but I also need to have them to produce on standardized tests or we don't get the money.

As Ann implies here, the administrative necessity of assessing and documenting students' progress has significant pedagogical implications. Because the students' achievements are partly measured by standardized tests and because the program's funding is based partly on these achievements, instructors like Ann may feel extra pressure to teach to the test.

Alice also discussed how the program's performance-based model affects her teaching. When asked if the program requires certain teaching methods, she said:

> It's more about goals and outcomes. In adult education we do have some restrictions that we have to work around because we are performance based. So we have to emphasize learner contact hours and we have to emphasize skill development that can be measured on a standardized test. And after a certain set number of hours of instruction we need to be able to post those tests and hopefully show that the learners are getting gains in those things we diagnosed when they first came into the program.

Alice's comments remind us that even though LARA is community-based, it operates within a larger structure of national adult education. Teachers and administrators in the program focus on engaging the community, but they must also follow national and state requirements that include assessing needs and documenting goals and achievements. Her explanation clarifies that assessing student skills, identifying goals, and marking achievements have both pedagogical and administrative functions. On the one hand, determining student needs, creating study plans, and documenting progress supports individualized learning. On the other, assessment and documentation are necessary to securing funding and answering to larger stakeholders.

## Conclusion

Clearly, LARA does not represent all adult literacy programs any more than one university could represent all institutions of higher education. As Greenberg argues, generalizing about adult literacy programs may be particularly difficult because the work occurs within such diverse contexts. However, LARA's characteristics may provide insight into some of the general characteristics of adult literacy education.

This insight may be useful to university and community members who are interested in collaborating with adult literacy programs. For example, prospective partners—particularly university groups—may be inclined to invite literacy programs onto their turf for events like workshops. This inclination is well intentioned, as university spaces are often larger, nicer, or better equipped than community spaces. However, LARA's mission of community action in the neighborhood suggests that university groups may do better to venture off campus and join community groups in their own space. Another characteristic, that the program needs a variety of resources to support individualized pedagogy, may have implications for the type of community engagement that will benefit adult literacy programs. For these programs, assistance with obtaining or creating resources may be a valuable result of collaboration. In a final example, service-learning participants who tutor adult students will be better equipped for the work when they understand that many adult students have complex lives and backgrounds. Service-learning students should be prepared for adult literacy groups like LARA that acknowledge the adult learners' personal challenges as part of the literacy work. These examples illustrate that collaboration with adult literacy programs is more effective when partners are familiar with the general characteristics of such groups. Further, more research about such projects can improve the engagement projects themselves and contribute to our growing knowledge of adult literacy.





## Endnotes

1. The Community Writing and Education Station (CWEST) was a long-term, collaborative project that involved two separate research studies, one led by me and the other led by Allen Brizee. Further, each of those studies contained numerous stages. It is beyond the scope of this article to describe every facet of research and engagement involved in CWEST. This article will focus primarily on my case study research about the adult literacy program. For more information about Brizee's research, please see his article, "Toward Participatory Civic Engagement: Findings and Implications of a Three-Year Community-Based Research Study," published in Computers and Composition, 2014. For a discussion of how our engagement research influenced our graduate education, please see "The Engaged Dissertation: Three Points of View," by Brizee, Linda Bergmann, and me, published in *Collaborative Futures: Critical Reflections on Publicly Active Graduate Education*, 2012.

2. Even though the present article focuses primarily on my case study of the adult literacy program, some discussion of the whole engagement project is essential to understanding the research methods for the present study. Specifically, the project's overall spirit of inquiry and collaboration guided my specific research methodology.

3. In the local context, the WorkOne and LARA are closely connected. The two groups share a space in a renovated elementary school and refer students to one another. While CWEST encompassed both programs, the present study focuses primarily on LARA, the adult literacy program.

4. This article focuses primarily on the first part of my larger case study. This first part began before the online writing lab materials were drafted and was designed to provide insight into the program before Brizee and I developed the materials. The second and third parts of the research raised more specific questions about the materials themselves and how the instructors used the materials.

5. Interviews and observations were conducted before and after the development of the online writing lab materials. This article focuses on the first part of the research, so the interviews and observations that were conducted before the materials were developed.

6. What are the needs, goals, available resources, and teaching practices of teachers in the adult literacy program?

7. In this section, the second part of each heading title is a quote from teacher interviews.

8. All names have been changed.

9. One observation was conducted at the county jail, where the program holds GED classes for inmates. The county jail classroom is a unique space for instruction that clearly differs from typical academic spaces like school classrooms and writing centers. I focus pri-

marily on the program's main learning lab in this article because this is where the majority of instruction, and the majority of my observations, takes place.

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