

RECLAIMING THE RHETORIC OF OUTCOMES: A LIFE-WIDE CURRICULUM IN ADULT ESOL

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The narrowing of adult education has forced programs to prioritize workforce outcomes, often at the expense of the goals that participants themselves set. This generates a range of adverse effects for participants and programs. Any potential resistance to these trends in adult education will hinge on work done at the classroom and program levels. This article describes a curricular model for community-based adult ESOL that incorporates authentic assessment of a range of life-wide literacies, thereby painting a fuller picture of the impact of our model and expanding the range of potential funders for community ESOL programs.

Recent federal legislation in the United States has reduced ESOL to a workforce skill, fundable only inasmuch as it generates human capital. Most teachers and program administrators know that adult immigrants can identify a range of reasons for learning the language—going grocery shopping independently, talking to their doctor, being involved with their children’s education, engaging civically, making friends with neighbors. However, the outcomes recognized by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA) focus almost exclusively on the workforce, what Holland (2019) aptly describes as a “placement, earning, credential” paradigm (p. 41).

This neoliberalization of adult education—codified under WIOA but reaching beyond it—has resulted in (a) shifts in curricular focus away from many learner needs; (b) the exclusion of learners whose goals diverge from the pre-approved set of goals; and (c) perverse incentives that reward programs for serving those who face fewer barriers to employment.

Teachers and program staff have the ability and responsibility to resist this shift, to help shape the discourse, and to make a case for well-rounded, equitable, learner-centered programs. At this point, such advocacy is an expected component of an English language teacher’s work (Linville, 2020); beyond that, practitioners may be the only ones positioned to make this case: We know our students and their needs, we know the impact that our programs make, and in many cases, we know how policy affects our programs and classrooms. Funders and legislators cannot be expected to know this without being told. Thus, it falls to us to articulate the fullness of the outcomes that our learners and our programs achieve. As the pursuit of workforce outcomes takes up more and more of our program capacity, it will become increasingly difficult to document other outcomes, lending urgency to this issue.

In this practice-oriented article, I present a replicable ESOL curricular model that uses self-assessment inventories to capture a broad range of competencies from other skill areas, which are regularly achieved in ESOL programs but seldom quantified and reported in the language of outcomes. I share this model in hopes that, by broadening the range of outcomes that we report, we can better align our work to the diverse needs of our participants, appeal to a greater range of funders, and take charge of the rhetoric around our work. Two key questions guided this project:

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- In the short term, how can our curriculum mitigate the tension between funder requirements and student needs?
- In the long term, how can our curriculum lay the groundwork for us to advocate for a better and expanded system of outcomes measurement that aligns with student needs?

The Programs

The work described herein was conducted at an immigrant-serving community-based organization outside of Boston, which delivered a range of adult education programs, mostly centered around ESOL. We offered two general ESOL programs, each separately funded. One program served approximately 60 participants at a time across three levels and was funded entirely by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). A second program, with the capacity to serve as many as 90 participants across five levels, was funded by a number of grants from corporate and family foundations, as well as a deeply subsidized fee paid by program participants. The state-funded program was of course subject to state oversight and accountability, which included budgetary oversight, outcomes reporting requirements, and alignment with state standards. The grant-funded program was not subject to state oversight, but for several pragmatic reasons we took pains to maintain continuity of curriculum and evaluation across the two programs. The curriculum at the time was organized into thematic units. While it was designed to stand on its own, in practice teachers depended heavily on the textbook series Pearson's Future (Lynn et al., 2019).

We were required to pre- and post-test participants on a standardized test approved by the National Reporting System (NRS). As was common practice in programs like ours in Massachusetts, we used BEST Plus for our lower two levels and TABE CLAS-E for our more advanced levels. One of the primary metrics by which our program was evaluated was the percentage of participants who showed a significant gain from pre-test to post-test.

Like many adult education programs, we tried to forge connections between the classroom and the community. We incorporated field trips into the curriculum, albeit informally: teachers were free to plan and lead them or not. We were also frequently approached by representatives from local businesses and organizations that wanted to give short presentations to our classes. Most of these we declined; they had little to offer our participants. But in some cases, there was a genuine intersection of interests: A representative from a local health plan wanted to connect with the immigrant community; a credit union had a financial literacy curriculum and first-time home buyer sessions that aligned with participant needs; a civic engagement organization was conducting a Get Out the Vote initiative. These we accepted. Over time, we developed a format for these sessions and turned them into a guest speaker series.

We had also realized that the guest speakers whose content most aligned with the needs of our participants quite often came with the potential for sponsorship or grant funding: banks have financial literacy funds, telecom corporations have digital literacy funds, health-care providers and insurers have health literacy initiatives, and so forth. These sponsorships became an additional funding stream in the grant-funded program, allowing us to grow the program and maintain a deeply subsidized rate for participants.

WIOA Trickles Down

WIOA had been signed into law in 2014, replacing the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 and, as far as federal law was concerned, more fully subsuming adult education under workforce development. These shifts were passed down to the state, which had some degree of flexibility in implementation. So, in the years following its passage, the DESE had been implementing WIOA in increments. This meant, among other things, increased emphasis on outcomes related to employment and earnings. For example, the following metrics were introduced for the fiscal year 2017:

- Employment in the second quarter after exit.
- Median Income in the second quarter after exit (Conway, 2016).

Simultaneously, process standards such as attendance and retention rates were being removed as measures of program effectiveness.

Belzer and Kim (2018) observed that federal funding accounts for less than half of all adult education funding but has substantial influence over the local practice. Our experience certainly bore this out. That influence seemed to extend even to private foundations: the primary corporate funder of the grant-funded program had begun requesting such outcomes as:

- Increased job placement.
- Increased employment experience (State Street Corporation, 2016).

Taken at face value, these shifts may seem benign. Career pathways are a good thing, right? Can anyone object to increased earnings and employment experience? And indeed, many of our participants were learning English for reasons that aligned with these goals. The problem was, however, that many were not, and the new reporting mandates threatened to drag our programs away from the needs of many of our participants.

An informal needs analysis confirmed this. We had begun conducting informal surveys about our participants' motivations for studying English, and learned that more than half of those in our programs were learning English for reasons unrelated to employment. Other commonly reported reasons for learning English were to be involved in their children's education, to speak to their doctor, to become U.S. citizens, to go shopping independently, and just "for life in America."

After briefly reviewing the history of federal funding for adult education in the United States, I turn to the adverse effects of the most recent legislation, WIOA. I then review the range of literature supporting the integration of various literacies into adult education and ESOL curricula.

The Neoliberalizing of Adult Education

The frustration we were experiencing was by no means unique to our program. There is a growing chorus of objections to WIOA and the neoliberalizing of adult education. It is important to understand that adult education does not need to be tied to workforce development, nor has it always been this way. As Belzer and Kim (2018) explain, federal funds were first allocated for adult education as part of the 1964 war on poverty; in 1966 funding shifted to the U.S. Office of Education. Although a 1974 amendment mandated coordination with the workforce system, adult education was still explicitly described in terms of developing human potential across a range of adult roles. This life-wide framing was included again in the National Literacy Act (NLA) of 1991. It was not until the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 that adult education funding was subsumed under workforce development (Belzer & Kim, 2018). The NLA and WIA may have provided some valuable focus in terms of assessment, accountability, professional development, and coordination, but Belzer (2017) argues that the fuller integration of the adult education and workforce development systems laid out in WIOA in 2014 has the effect of "narrowing" the purpose of adult education "to a specific set of tasks and purposes related to employment" (p. 16).

The Effects of WIOA

In this section, I limit my focus to what I see as the fundamental problem with WIOA as it pertains to adult education: It imposes a set of outcomes that originate not from the needs of learners, but from the perceived needs of the economy (Jacobson, 2016; Shin & Ging, 2019). Aside from running baldly counter to well-established best practice, this legislation has produced a series of adverse circumstances within which programs need to operate: a persistent tension between learners' stated goals and program performance standards, the exclusion of many underserved participants, and a setup for failure at the program level.

A misalignment of goals. Laying out the vision for the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA), the portion of WIOA that funds adult education) the federal Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE) recommends a learner-centered approach to program design and delivery. However, the legislation itself makes it plain that it prioritizes the needs of the market: four of the six primary WIOA performance indicators are focused on workforce development, and only one is achievable for learners whose goals are not workforce-related (Shin & Ging, 2019). As Reder (2020) observes (and our informal survey at my program indicated), many adults “wish to improve their basic skills for other reasons [. . .] such as assisting their children with schoolwork, understanding and addressing their health issues or those of family members, or participating in civic affairs such as voting or understanding political issues” (p. 51).

This top-down prescription of acceptable goals for adult learners is more than just paternalistic; it puts teachers and administrators in the impossible position of choosing between stable funding and the needs of the learners we have committed to serving. Aligning program goals with learner interests and motivations is a key determinant of persistence, essential to participants’ success in adult education programs (Comings, 2007). In the classroom, satisfying accountability measures can mean the narrowing of classroom practices, assessments, our conception of our learners, and the role that learners play in determining their education (Belzer, 2017). Pickard (2016) argues that these measures could limit classroom opportunities to develop skills for those with low literacy scores.

A systemic exclusion of participants. WIOA also effectively shuts out many adults in need. Reder (2020) points out that this framework excludes the “millions of adults [who] are not in the workforce due to age, disabilities, poor health, family care responsibilities, etc.” (p. 51). By centralizing program oversight and accountability in the NRS, WIOA also excludes undocumented learners (Larrotta, 2017).

Less directly, the federal performance indicators also introduce a perverse incentive. In practice, the fact that programs are held accountable to outcomes such as securing employment and entering training means that they are effectively incentivized to enroll those who are already primed to succeed in the workforce (Eyster & Nightingale, 2017; Holland, 2016; Pickard, 2016; Shin & Ging, 2019). The obverse of that same “creaming” effect is that the legislation deprioritizes the learners most in need—i.e., those who struggle with basic literacy or face greater barriers to participation (Eyster & Nightingale, 2017; Holland, 2019). Pickard (2016) observes that this has the potential to disproportionately impact African Americans, perpetuating and perhaps exacerbating racist educational inequality.

A setup for failure. And finally, this mismatch between performance standards and participant goals means that programs are set up to fail at multiple levels.

At the program level, WIOA performance standards focus on outcomes that are not, in fact, the linear result of the effectiveness of our programs and ignore many actual indicators of impact. Employment outcomes are a poor proxy for the quality of programs because they are based upon decisions made out in the labor market, influenced by countless factors beyond the control of program staff (Holland, 2019; Jacobson, 2016). Moreover, the federal accountability system is failing to capture much of the impact that programs do make. Holland (2019) argues that this “placement, earnings, and credential” framework fails to capture the impact that the system makes in improving skills and overcoming barriers. In other words, some programs that are delivering excellent adult education could, by WIOA metrics, appear to be failing.

This accountability protocol can also result in failure for individual participants. It incentivizes case managers to place participants in jobs and training, whether or not those jobs align with participants’ skills or goals (Holland, 2019). Furthermore, Jacobson (2016) argues that, even if programs can achieve what WIOA defines as success, we might be doing no more than producing a churn in low-wage jobs, helping our learners displace other vulnerable workers.

The short-term, program-level failure to capture impact is also likely to have effects that ripple outward. Holland (2019) posits that the resulting incomplete picture of our work can be used to argue for the disinvestment in the workforce system as a whole, and points to a Heritage Foundation paper

(Heritage Foundation, 2015) that does precisely that. Reder (2020) observes that WIOA diverts programmatic resources and time in such a way that “programs have slowly lost their capacity to attract funding that connects basic skills instruction with other social aims” (p. 49).

Calls for a Solution

Many of these writers have called for solutions that better capture the range of differences that our programs make. Reder (2020) says, “We need funding for basic skills programs that are designed to meet a broader set of lifelong and life-wide goals of adults and communities” (p. 49). Belzer and Kim (2018) call for “a broad curriculum focused, but not narrowed, on the array of purposes that adults have for improving their skills” (p. 607). Shin and Ging (2019) describe a need for “alternatives to the current, instrumentalist workforce development orientation to adult education” (2019, p. 178). Holland (2019) outlines what he calls an Employability Index to more fully capture a more participant-centered picture of impact; this is contextualized to workforce development programs but also has implications for adult education and ESOL programs. Comings et al. (2001) argue that adult education curricula need to expand to encompass an ever-growing list of basic skills needed to fulfill a range of adult roles.

I agree, and I believe that the curriculum described below is a step toward answering these calls, drawing together concerns related to funding, curriculum, assessment, and participant-centeredness.

Multiple Literacies in Adult Education

There is certainly precedent for incorporating additional literacies into adult education. Though it is generally focused on integrating a single literacy, there is substantially less focus on the integration of various literacies into a single curriculum in the narrower context of adult ESOL. Please note that for each of the following literacies, volumes could be written on best practices, program models, and the impact of integrating them into ESOL programs; here, I simply intend to demonstrate the advisability of such integration.

College and Career Readiness

College and career readiness in adult education is widely documented. One need look no further than Pimental’s (2013) College and Career Readiness Standards for Adult Education (CCRS) for the most influential example. The CCRS is an attempt to standardize “what educators and employers have clearly identified as non-negotiable knowledge and skills [. . .] to meet the real-world demands of postsecondary training and employment” (p. 3).

Health Literacy

There is a great deal of literature on the successful integration of health literacy into adult education programs. Hohn (2002) points to the pedagogical and health benefits of integrating health literacy with ABE as an opportunity to contextualize literacy to real-world needs. Santos and Paasche-Orlow (2019) renew that call for greater collaboration between service providers and educators in a special supplement of *HLRP: Health Literacy Research and Practice*.

Digital Literacy

Reder et al. (2011) argue that basic digital skills are so “central to academic success” (p. 22) for the Low Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition (LESLLA) population that the definition of second language literacy must be expanded to include digital literacy (p. 33).

Civics and Citizenship

ESOL and civics content are frequently integrated. Nash (2010) focuses on integrating civics into adult ESOL, arguing that practices required of various adult roles—figuring out how systems work, influencing

decision-makers, advocating for oneself—“should be recognized as legitimate course goals equal to the communication skills and competencies that currently anchor ESOL curricula” (p. 2). Kallenbach and Nash (2016) describe a national initiative that positions adult ESOL programs as central to immigrant integration, recommending “customized English language programming related to civic integration that includes networking with partners focused on access to citizenship as well as partners that foster broad civic engagement” (p. 40).

Financial Literacy

On financial literacy in U.S. adult education settings, the literature is limited. Tisdell et al. (2013) bring together what work has been done on U.S.-based programs. Braden (2020) proposes a curriculum framework for financial literacy in ESOL programs, expressly focused on the Latino immigrant community.

Parent Involvement

Shiffman (2013) points out that “The association between parental educational attainment and children’s educational outcomes is widely recognized” (p. 187) and makes the case that ABE (Adult Basic Education) and ESOL programs are uniquely positioned to strengthen parental involvement by developing participants’ knowledge and experiences, social capital, and self-efficacy. Indeed, ESOL for family literacy and English for parents and caregivers have become common program models (for recent examples, see Applebaum et al., 2020; Fregeau & Leier, 2020; Isaac, 2017).

The Curriculum

Our program was due to redesign our curriculum, which soon had to be aligned with the College and Career Readiness (CCR) Standards (Pimental, 2013). We saw an opportunity in the confluence of several circumstances.

First and foremost, we wanted to counterbalance the pull toward workforce outcomes with the range of other needs that we had identified with participant surveys.

Second, we had decided to integrate field trips and guest speakers as a formal component of the curriculum. We believed the benefits of this decision would include increased exposure to authentic language input; increased social capital (Coleman, 1988); and an opportunity to provide authentic immigrant role models in the community, rather than the monocultural white models that dominate ESOL materials (Sheppard, in press).

Third, we were looking for ways to diversify our funding streams. For one thing, we simply needed to increase funding to expand the program (we had a waiting list for classes over 200 names long). But additionally, we wanted to become less dependent upon the government contracts and corporate grants that seemed to be pulling us from our participants’ needs—so we were looking for ways to receive sponsorships and grants from foundations that had not traditionally funded ESOL.

And fourth, we wanted to incorporate authentic self-assessments that would balance out the state-mandated standardized tests, which could be discouraging and opaque to participants. We regularly found ourselves telling participants, “Do not worry about this test. Do not try to make sense of this score. It is okay if your score does not increase.” This was particularly true of Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE), a test on which participants would frequently show decreases from pre-test to post-test.

Scope and Sequence

As Table 1 shows, the basic conceit of the curriculum is quite simple: Woven into the scope and sequence, right alongside the ESOL content, are strands of additional literacies. These literacies are assessed, generally using self-assessment inventories, and reported to funders in the language of outcomes. Many of the additional literacies outcomes are achieved with guest speakers and field trips.

The broader range of outcomes and the stronger relationships with community institutions opens the program up to new, more diverse funding opportunities.

The additional strands we included were financial literacy, health literacy, digital literacy, civics and critical literacy, college and career readiness, and parent engagement. There are about 30 competencies per yearlong level, but there is no mandate or expectation that all participants achieve all competencies.

A great deal of flexibility is built into each semester and teachers are encouraged to select from the competencies in response to participant needs. Participants and teachers track progress in achieving these life-wide outcomes on self-assessment checklists, which become a core curricular document.

Table 1
Self-Assessed Outcomes of Additional Literacies

Strand	Example Competencies		Example Funders
	ESOL Level 1	ESOL Level 3	
ESOL	<i>I can ask what words mean and ask for help when I don't understand.</i>	<i>I can distinguish between my opinion on a topic and a writer's perspective.</i>	<i>DESE, literacy funds, immigrant-focused foundations</i>
Financial literacy	<i>I can count and make change with U.S. money.</i>	<i>I can open and use a checking or savings account.</i>	<i>Banks with financial literacy funds, first-time home buyer programs</i>
Health literacy	<i>I can talk about my health and body in basic terms.</i>	<i>I can describe my diet and plan healthy meals for myself and my family.</i>	<i>Regional health plans, insurers, CHNAs, health-care providers</i>
Digital literacy	<i>I can create and check events in a personal digital calendar.</i>	<i>I can find information about what is near me in a Maps app.</i>	<i>Telecom foundation or local digital literacy initiative</i>
Civics and criticality	<i>I can complete common forms with personal information.</i>	<i>I can recognize famous U.S. presidents.</i>	<i>Civic engagement and "get-out-the-vote" funds</i>
College Readiness	<i>I can follow spoken and written instructions for tests.</i>	<i>I can plan, write, and revise organized essays with many sources.</i>	<i>State- and workforce-focused foundations</i>
Career readiness	<i>I can describe my dream job in simple terms.</i>	<i>I can write a follow-up thank you letter after an interview.</i>	
Parent engagement	<i>I can identify the important people at my child's school.</i>	<i>I can understand some of the Common Core Standards.</i>	<i>Literacy and family-focused foundations</i>

The Discourse of Outcomes

I want to emphasize that these additional strands are not a radical departure from what was already happening in our ESOL curriculum. Most adult ESOL programs use a core textbook series contextualized to the adult immigrant experience (such as Future, Stand Out, Ventures). The unit themes of these series invariably coincide with the additional literacy strands that we integrated into our curriculum. The key—in this case, then—is not in doing something completely new in the classroom but in the documenting and reporting of what we already do.

At the start of each semester, participants are given a one-page inventory of the competencies to be developed during the semester, spanning all strands. This inventory guides instruction throughout the semester. At the end of the semester, the participants' responses are collected again. Comparing the two surveys provides a simple mechanism for transmuting a wide range of common classroom activities into the discourse of outcomes:

By the end of the program, 94.4% of participants reported being able to speak to their children's teachers in English. Before the program, that number was only 27.7%.

These statements can then be incorporated into grant applications, grant reports, newsletters, annual reports. They can also be aggregated by strand into broader impact statements, such as these:

In FY20, 85 adult participants reported increases in financial literacy competencies, 82 reported increases in health literacy competencies, and 78 reported increases in parenting competencies.

In addition to the self-assessment inventories, teachers were strongly encouraged to use authentic assessments wherever possible. For instance, participants might demonstrate their ability to apply for a checking account by completing an actual copy of an application and role-playing with a guest speaker from the bank. Or they might show their ability to count exact change by actually taking a field trip to the store and making a purchase.

The Collateral Value of Authenticity

In this OCTA approach, readers may recognize the influence of competency-based education—its influence in the field is pervasive and undeniable (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). But it was, in fact, an interest in task-based language teaching (TBLT) that shaped our thinking about this curriculum. In Long's (2014) version of TBLT, tasks—real-world activities that participants need to engage in—are the organizational unit of the language curriculum, instead of grammatical forms or vocabulary lists. To be clear, ours was not expressly a task-based approach; we were guided by a desire to address the programmatic challenge before us rather than by fidelity to a particular theoretical framework. Regardless, the fact that the learning objectives are authentic tasks has implications that are at once obvious and, I believe, underleveraged. When we talk about task-based approaches, we tend to focus on the value of authenticity for our participants, for their lives, for their language development—all for good reason. When we are teaching, this focus is essential. When we leave the classroom, however, it is worth adjusting our eyes. As language teachers, much of the work that we do is opaque to those who fund it. Foundation representatives are likely uninterested in the relative authenticity or validity of our approach to language instruction. The centering of real-world tasks, however, produces a collateral benefit when discussing our work with outside stakeholders. When a participant's progress is described in terms of their mastery of the past continuous or more consistent articulation of a dental fricative, funders can be spared these details. However, when we can describe their progress in terms of a newfound ability to go to open a checking account independently, we now have a much more vivid story of impact to tell, one that anyone can understand. So, the fact that target tasks are authentic makes more of our outcomes relevant to literacy funders.

On top of that, it makes those outcomes relevant to more funders: Because these competencies intersect with other widely known areas of need—e.g., health literacy, financial literacy—they are of interest to organizations and stakeholders beyond just those focused on supporting literacy and immigrant communities. Our programs have always been preparing participants to better talk to their doctors, bank tellers, and teachers, but by now describing our impact in those terms, we make our program compelling and supportable to funders whose priorities are health literacy, financial literacy, family literacy, and so on.

Anticipating the Funder

Funding is written into this curriculum in a way that may give pause to some practitioners. Many of us are accustomed to drawing a hard line between funding and instruction. Nevertheless, this disconnect, I contend, is part of the reason we have ended up where we are. When we walk into the classroom and pretend that the funder does not exist, we are setting ourselves up for a tug of war that we can only lose—that we are already losing. Writing funding into the very fiber of the curriculum should not be seen as capitulating to funder demands; rather, it is taking the opportunity to set the terms of that relationship explicitly. It empowers us to have a voice in where the lines are drawn and what is valued.

Following Blommaert (2005) and Shin and Ging (2019), who argue compellingly for the transformative and emancipatory power of engagement with discourses of power, a key assumption underlying our approach is that outcomes derive much of their power from the rhetoric itself. Thus, by asserting these life-wide competencies into the rhetoric of outcomes, we can transform the power dialectic between programs and funders, where funders have historically set the terms. Funders do take cues from programs, and in our (admittedly anecdotal) experience, these outcomes made a powerful impression upon funders and other stakeholders in our sphere of influence.

Where Do We Go from Here?

I have shared a simple curricular mechanism for documenting a range of participant outcomes in an adult ESOL program. More work, as ever, is needed.

This curriculum itself is by no means a solution. The adult education system is drifting away from those it is meant to serve, and this was simply a stay against that drift. At the classroom and program level, teachers and administrators should seek other sustainable ways to document and celebrate a range of outcomes. Schwab (2019) pointed to an iterative, dialogic approach to adult literacy curriculum as a strategy for resisting neoliberal ideologies. There are practical barriers that might prevent many programs from implementing such an approach, but this is certainly a route worth pursuing. Rivera (1999) described a model that took participants' knowledge, experience, and interests as a starting point for a curriculum driven by critical inquiry and popular research, using video as a "democratic tool" to "[reappropriate] their individual knowledge" (p. 493). In 1999, a program like this must have been radical; with the technology of today, it could be widely replicated and transformative.

Align with Similar Frameworks

Future work can also connect success at the program level with more widely recognized frameworks and assessments. The competencies in our curriculum were developed from our own experience and context, without reference to existing frameworks, such as the Northstar Digital Literacy Standards, CASAS Competencies, or the OCTAE's Teaching the Skills That Matter. Establishing alignment with more widely known frameworks could help to increase recognition by a broad range of funders.

Having established a mechanism for documenting life-wide outcomes, we should then transform the narrative within our local orbits to normalize these outcomes. We can do this by placing participant-defined outcomes prominently alongside those prescribed by funders in any places that outcomes appear: curricula, grant reports, annual reports, websites, public messaging, and impact storytelling.

Establish Funder Relationships

We should also develop relationships with funders, explicitly informing them about the adverse effects of a narrowed adult education system. Equipped with both quantitative and narrative accounts of the impact of our work, we should encourage existing funders of ESOL to recognize a wider range of outcomes and metrics that are consistent with our participants' goals and the nature of second language acquisition. We should also actively connect with funders and partners in adjacent fields—community health, civic participation, family literacy, community development, criminal justice reform, digital equity, and inclusion—raising their awareness of the role that adult education can play in advancing their work. The Open Door Collective is one national organization focused on fostering such collaborations.

Advocate

And we must advocate beyond, at the state and national level. We must meet with our elected officials, invite them to our programs, and equip them with the stories and statistics of the life-wide impact of adult education. Ensure that they understand what a powerful outcome it can be to take the bus independently, to talk to your doctor in private, or to introduce yourself to your neighbor.

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