

Literacy Action Project

This project from Literacy Works aims to bring thought-provoking ideas that advance social justice and anti-racist principles from discussion to action. Read the article, dive into the resources, and bring the discussion questions with concrete suggestions back to your organization to make movement on these issues.

Winter 2021

Education is Not Neutral. Neither is Language. ***Reflecting on the way we talk about our work***

Adult literacy professionals and tutors know the importance of vocabulary. Whether we teach ESL, ABE, or career pathways, we teach our students how words have specific connotations and evoke certain feelings in different situations. We examine these nuances of the English language with adult learners, but do we do the same when we're talking *about* adult learners? The language we use to talk about our work directly impacts the way we think about our work and how learners feel about their experiences.

Before we dive into terms specific to adult literacy, let's consider an example from the current headlines: *riot* versus *protest*. The word *riot* conjures images of violence and destruction and often suggests characteristics about the participants. The word *protest*, however, may conjure different images, such as citizens performing a democratic right. These words are often used interchangeably, but they certainly mean different things and each dictate a perspective of events. Recent reports have shown that more than 90% of the protests in 2020 around racial justice were peaceful, but many descriptions of these events were steeped in language of violence and anarchy.

As you can see in the resources in this document, there has been a growing movement toward anti-oppressive language in the human services sectors. We bring this discussion forward because the adult education field must move forward.

As author Richard Shaull wrote in the introduction to Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, "There is no such thing as neutral education," and we argue that there is no such thing as neutral language either. Here, we will discuss how some common terms and labels are stigmatizing and harmful and uphold the status quo, which is rooted in white supremacy.

Literacy

Let's reflect on what *illiteracy* literally means – without literacy. Even a cursory analysis reveals that this term is not often used accurately. It suggests that literacy is a quality that you either possess or don't. The reality is that very few students enter programs with absolutely no familiarity with literacy, especially when we consider the broad spectrum of the concept.

While the term *illiterate* is generally used without malice, labelling someone as illiterate creates a sense of helplessness, inability, and deficit. It also erases the range of strategies, skills, and strengths that adult learners utilize to navigate the world.

Adults who have returned to school, students in our adult education program, English language learners – these are just a few ways we can focus on where our students are going or what they have overcome rather than focusing on what they lack.

Skills

Low-skilled is another term that gets used regularly but is truly a misnomer. Terms like this devalue certain jobs and elevate others. A certified nursing assistant who takes care of older adults with dementia on the night shift must have a huge reservoir of skills. A person that stocks goods at a grocery store must now utilize health and safety skills amidst their regular job duties. Both of these jobs are sometimes labeled as 'low skilled work' but are essential and society couldn't function without them.

Using terms like *low-skilled* demonstrates complicity with a hierarchical work system that places those with college educations at the top and adult learners at the bottom. Since all skills are valuable in the right context, *low-skilled* is not a useful term. What we really mean is that these jobs are low-paying. Realizing this reframes the situation as a livable wage issue rather than a denigration of workers for doing essential jobs while not being compensated fairly.

Jobs that are prized tend to be white collar jobs and require degrees but when we change the environment, these skills are not always the most critical, as we have seen during the ongoing pandemic crisis. Skill value is often associated with job desirability and using terms like *low-skilled* adds a layer of judgement on how we perceive a person based on their work.

Leaving School

Let's now consider the term *drop-out*. This term does little to encapsulate the complexity of the situations that occur for a student to leave school. When we label people as drop-outs, we insinuate that a person simply chose to stop coming to school.

It's much less complicated to suggest someone determined their own fate than acknowledge real systemic issues often at play, ranging from a lack of equitable resources in schools to segregation in communities to racist drug and policing policies that have especially harmed people of color across the country.



Describing individuals as drop-outs is inaccurate, harmful, and demoralizing. Some advocates use the term *push-out* in acknowledgement of the systemic issues that lead someone to leave school prematurely. Describing individuals as drop-outs is inaccurate, harmful, and demoralizing.

Mass Incarceration

When our work involves supporting people who have experience in the prison system, we must not reduce their humanity to that experience. We may use a term like *former inmate* or *ex-offender* and think that we've qualified our description adequately. Again, this language is passive and assumes that we, as a society, have done nothing to contribute to the incarceration of this person.

Even a quick study of the prison industrial complex shows its roots are in slavery and in racist legislation that have contributed to the current state of incarceration.

We may advocate for causes like "Ban the Box," which encourages employers to not ask about prior convictions, but if we continue to define our learners as convicts or parolees, we fail to see the learner as a whole, dynamic person.

In Summary

We gave some suggestions here for incorporating more affirming language into your communications, but the moral of the story is that you need to talk with your community and listen! No group is a monolith and language changes - ask people how they want to be identified!

These coded words we describe hide the realities of racism and patriarchy in our American history and uphold oppressive systems while shaping how we and others view this work. When we use terms like the ones described above, we position ourselves as complicit maintainers of the status quo. Our work will continue to be seen as a form of "do goodery" rather than the work of active change agents in partnership with our students. We can honor the efforts of our students without relying on outdated language or maintaining tropes that students must show their "worthiness" to receive needed support.

Changing our language won't change all the problems we have. It certainly can't replace action. But the words we use can be a first step to seeing how different things can be and how we can be part of the momentum that can move us toward a more equitable society. And until we reach that, we can hold each other accountable.

As activist Angela Davis is often quoted: "In a racist society it is not enough to be non-racist, we must be anti-racist." So it is with us - it is not enough to do good; we also must make change. Learn more about why language matters. Model humanizing language to others. Consider the implications of policies and the language embedded in them. Call out when you observe something that isn't right. Let's ground our work in humanity, respect, and the goal of a truly equitable future.

RESOURCES



Clear Language Lab at Literacy Works

Resources on clear, effective, transparent, and affirming communications that are audience-centered

Framework Institute

Variety of resources on crafting narratives to move movements forward

Sum of Us: Progressive Style Guide

Language guide that offers a variety of powerful examples of ways to talk about groups that are affirming and forward

Using Equitable Language

Another source for using equitable language in your communications with lots of additional resources

Article on words and their influence on our thought by the Brookings Institute

Analysis of the power of using just language to describe places

Shelterforce: The Opposite of Deficit-Based Language Isn't Asset-Based Language. It's Truth-Telling

Essay on truthfulness in addressing systemic change

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



- How do the words we use affect how we think? How are others affected by the words we choose?
- Consider the words 'riot' and 'demonstration'. They are often used interchangeably, but are they the same? What assumptions are you making when you use one of these terms? Can you think of other pairs of words that have similar meanings but vary wildly in the contexts in which they are used?
- Have you used one of the words described in the article? (no judgement!) Where/from whom did you learn to use it? Do you still use it today? Why or why not?
- What are other examples of language influencing your understanding of a person/place/thing/idea? How does changing that word change how you think about it?
- How can we model language for stakeholders in our network?
- Have you ever had conversations with your students about how they identify? What did you learn?
- How is your work trauma-informed? How do you create safety and build relationships through your communications?

ACTION STEPS



Have a discussion centered on these themes with your staff and identify where improvement is needed. You can use the **Discussion Questions** above to get started.



Check out the *Sum of Us' Progressive Style Guide*. Do an audit of your materials and identify and make changes in your internal and external communications.



Commit to carving out time to focus on your communications. Check out our [Writing for Understanding cohort](#) at the Clear Language Lab at Literacy Works offered throughout the year.



Listen and learn from your community. What language feels safe for folks? How do people feel about the language you are using right now?

Questions?

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