

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.

Summer 2021

Adult Education: More than Just Workforce

“Leaders who do not act dialogically, but insist on imposing their decisions, do not organize the people--they manipulate them. They do not liberate, nor are they liberated: they oppress.”

— Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Neoliberalism + Its Impact on Adult Education

Neoliberalism is an economic idea that encourages privatization of public services and puts an increased emphasis on self-sufficiency, particularly of the middle and working classes. In short, more private services and less government support. This is “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” thinking. The basic idea is that free-market capitalism will create a level playing field for all Americans regardless of race, ethnicity, age, gender, socioeconomic status, housing situation, language, or education level.

Neoliberalism heavily emphasizes the importance of workplace productivity and job placement. For this reason, this philosophy creates a strong push to create more workers and a high demand for job placement.

In recent years, the term adult education has become nearly synonymous with workforce preparation. This tension is the focus of this essay.

Adult Education Funding

If you have been in adult education for a while, you might have noticed a shift in the 1990s. With the Workforce Investment Act (WIA, 1998) and even more so with the updated Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA, 2014), a national economic purpose is emphasized:

To amend the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 to strengthen the United States workforce development system through innovation in, and alignment and improvement of, employment, training, and education programs in the United States, and to promote individual and national economic growth, and for other purposes.

Perhaps “other purposes” can include individual efficacy and lifelong learning, but the law spells out a pretty clear intent: to create a workforce development system that meets the needs of the United States economy. Many private foundations that once funded adult literacy have also shifted to funding workforce training, leaving those who need the most support with less access than ever before.

Education as a Means to an End

Under neoliberal policies, adult learners are encouraged to gain education if that education helps them to secure a job. As Mark Abendroth cites in his paper on the subject, “Within neoliberal economies, knowledge is reduced to information, thus making it variously transferrable, replaceable, and disposable” (2014, p.19). Education in this way is valued only when it produces something. Such a single-minded focus on jobs shifts adult education into an employer-focused system, rather than a people-focused system. Reconciling equity and our learner needs with these economic priorities gets complicated quickly.

Especially when our field is encouraging participants to apply for warehouse jobs at companies that are infamous for their poor working conditions and dismissal of basic employee rights. When we place adults in low-paying jobs with no further educational support, we do not support them. We send them into a sort of indentured servitude (Yankwitt, 2020, p. 60) Committing adults to a life of low-pay work, long hours, and limited advancement increases capital for wealthy businesses and creates a worker-mill for corporations but does little to support the learner.

We’ve even seen this show up in ways during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many businesses have tried to control the narrative around labor shortages seen in 2021 as due to factors such as government benefits or people simply not wanting to work. Others have pushed back to say that people simply are no longer interested in working at businesses that do not value them, offer flexibility, and compensate them for their labor.

Missed Opportunities

Adult education has long played a role in the growth of the whole person. However, with limited resources and funding emphasizing workforce development, often programs find themselves stuck trying to decide where their priorities should lie.

These policies also neglect the real necessity for what researcher Stephen Reder calls “lifelong and life-wide goals” (2020). In his article, Reder recognizes the value of adult education over the life span as well as across different parts of life, not just in attaining a job. He advocates for more growth in funding areas to reach these critical needs for adult learners.



When we focus almost exclusively on job placement, we also lose important opportunities for community building and leadership among adult learners, with free-market capitalism edging out collective social good.

Inequity Under Neoliberalism

The premise presented by neoliberalism is that we're all at the same starting place. But we all know by now, especially with the deaths of more than half a millions Americans from COVID-19 and the murder of George Floyd, that this country and its many systems were not built for everyone, but a few - mostly white people, mostly men.

Put plainly, a neoliberal approach to adult education runs counter to anti-racist work and support of the working class. It upholds racist and white supremacist ideologies about working class folx.

Prioritizing Learning for All

In our own state of Illinois, a smaller secondary funding stream through the Illinois Library System funds volunteer adult literacy programming with outcomes that focus on:

- *Increased skills in reading, writing, math and/or English language.*
- *Increased knowledge of civic responsibilities (e.g., voting, using the public library)*
- *Increased ability of the volunteer tutors to provide effective adult literacy instruction*

While this funding stream is designed to be centered on the needs of community members, it is a relatively small funding stream and relies almost exclusively on a primarily volunteer workforce. While robust, it has its limitations.

Paying a coordinator \$18 an hour (only about 20% more than minimum wage in Chicago) would be \$37,440. As you can see below, adding in fringe benefits, supplies, and indirect costs does not leave much room for anything else beyond a single staff person.

As well, there are many local community-based organizations that receive additional funding from faith communities or other sources. Many of these organizations run on very small budgets, and sometimes they have to rely on funding that comes with some strings attached.

Average funding for adult volunteer literacy programs through the Secretary of State Adult Volunteer Literacy Program in FY21 in Illinois + Chicago



Illinois
~\$61,000



Chicago
~\$55,000

For these reasons, adult education programs are often caught in the middle. They want to support their community of adult learners but also need funding. Therefore, many programs concede to the work-focused requirements of WIOA-type funding streams because they offer more money and it allows programs to keep their doors open even though it means deemphasizing some needs of the community.

What We Can Do

Depending on your role, you may or may not have a say in some of these issues directly. But as program coordinators, teachers, volunteers, and just interested community members, what can we do? Here are some ideas, and we hope you bring more to the conversation:

Integrate Worker Rights Into Your Curriculum

Make worker rights an essential part of your curriculum, especially if you teach or tutor in a workforce-focused program. For example, if your curriculum requires you to teach job search skills, think about adding a lesson on wage theft, what to do if students find themselves in unsafe work situations, or how to compare workplace benefits.

Connect with Workers' Rights + Other Advocacy Organizations

Connect with a local union group or workers' rights organization and have them share what they do and what students can do if they find themselves in an unjust workplace situation. For example, a few in Chicago: [Chicago Jobs with Justice](#), [Chicago Community and Workers' Rights](#), and [Arise Chicago](#).

Recognize how strong policies related to childcare, transportation, healthcare, and other aspects of everyday life can improve people's lives in tangible ways. Connect with groups advocating for these rights, too.

Identify Transferable Skills - And Use Them!

Support learners to develop the skills they need to advocate for themselves. When you are teaching a lesson on cover letters, for example, can you detour to writing letters to your alderman to solve a pothole problem?

Incorporate Problem-Posing Into Your Work

Consider problem posing strategies to help students navigate difficult situations. Ensuring your learners know they can trust you and talk about real challenges is huge – no extra lesson planning required.

Raise Up Employers Doing It Right

Are you partnering with employers who are doing the right things? Investigate before you send them job seekers.

- Do they pay a living-wage?
- Do they provide paid training and generous benefits?
- Do they post their salaries in their job postings?

Looking Ahead

By critically examining the impacts of systems such as neoliberalism, we can start to re-envision an equitable, inclusive, collaborative learning environment that works for everyone.

RESOURCES

A Lifelong and Life-Wide Framework for Adult Literacy Education

An article by Stephen Reder explaining the value of life-long and life-wide learning and emphasizing that education is more than just job training.

Literacy Assistance Center

A nonprofit organization dedicated to strengthening and expanding the adult education system, and to advancing adult literacy as a core value in our society and a foundation for equal opportunity and social justice.

Adult Education at Risk: Fronts of Resistance to Neoliberalism

Read about how neoliberalism has "narrowed the scope of adult education"

Workers' Rights for Workforce Development

Build some workers' rights activities and lessons into your curriculum. Check out these examples to get you started. Consider having a recently placed participant share their experiences with the class too!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Consider your work in adult education. What role do you think adult education plays in society? What role do you think it should play?
- What do you think about the phrases "a job is a job" or "any job is better than no job"?
- Think about your employer partners - what do you know about their ethics?
- What are some dangers (if any) of receiving the majority of funding from one source, particularly a federally funded program like WIOA?
- In your opinion, is education a means to an end (namely for getting a job) or does it have value on its own?
- Under neoliberal policies and priorities, participants who do not want (or are not able) to get a job are not always supported fully. Do you notice this at your organization? Brainstorm some ways to include and value those not in the workforce and honor their commitment to life-long and life-wide goals.

ACTION STEPS



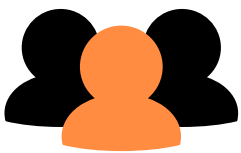
Have a discussion centered on these themes with your staff and identify where improvement is needed. You can use the **Discussion Questions** above to get started.



Check out the resources included here about workforce in adult education and find out what your organization feels about the role of education and job placement.



Research [5 Common Ethical Issues in the Workplace](#) and do some investigation into the employers where you are placing your participants. Do they hold up to the scrutiny?



Check in with a recently placed participant: do they like their job, do they feel safe there, is it a good and sustainable job? Gather more employee-focused experiences and consider if they match what the employer is presenting.

Questions?

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