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NAVIGATING A SYSTEM: ESOL STUDENTS & THE HOMEBUYING MAZE

by Nancy Coffey and Dulany Alexander

[This article was originally written in 1999 for inclusion in the final report of the A.L.R.I.'s Homebuying Readiness Project, which can be found on the A.L.R.I.'s web site, under Special Projects. It provides a good example of how curriculum can be built around a particular content area or theme.]

This year, for the second year in a row, our program, Operation Bootstrap, received a Curriculum Frameworks grant from the Massachusetts Department of Education. For our first year's project, we had developed a center-wide teaching unit about the city of Lynn, where the agency is located and where many of the students and staff live. In using such a broad topic and employing as many teaching approaches as we could to teach the topic, we had been able to match each lesson's objectives to the various parts of the Curriculum Frameworks that the given lesson reflected. This process allowed us to become familiar with the whole of the Curriculum Frameworks and to learn how much of it could be applied to our teaching overall. Although we had enjoyed the collaboration with our fellow teachers and the increased interaction between students from various classes, we knew that for the second year our next step in applying the Curriculum Frameworks would be to actually implement an entire strand. As a program, we decided on the ESOL Navigating Systems strand as our focus. (For a complete description of the ESOL Curriculum Frameworks see the Massachusetts' Department of Education Adult and Community Learning Services Cluster's Web Site at <<http://www.doe.mass.edu/acls/ESOLFrameworks1098.html>>.)

Because some of our students had previously chosen homebuying as a topic that they wanted to study, we decided to participate in the A.L.R.I.'s 1999 Homebuying Readiness Curriculum Project, which made use of the FannieMae Foundation's workbook, *How to Buy a Home in the United States*.

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ABE HALFWAY AROUND THE WORLD

by Bob Keith

[This past summer, after learning of the Adult Literacy Resource Institute from our website, staff at the Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Council (VALBEC) in Australia e-mailed us to see if someone here would be interested in writing an article for their journal, describing the field of adult basic education in this corner of the United States. David Rosen and I agreed to write an article for them and asked if, in response, someone there could write a similar article for our newsletter. So the following presents a picture we seldom get to see—a view of adult basic education as practiced in another part of the world, specifically the Australian state of Victoria.—Ed.]

Hello Boston! I'm Bob Keith and I work for the Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Council (VALBEC) in Australia. This brief article is in response to an account of adult literacy and basic education (ALBE) in Boston written for our journal, *Fine Print*, by David Rosen and Steve Reuys. Inevitably, it is impossible to capture the complexity of any field in such a short space, and these comments are entirely idiosyncratic, but I hope you get some sense of ALBE as it is in Australia.

VALBEC is a professional body, based in Melbourne, that seeks to

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Please share this newsletter
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material for the next issue is:
February 15.

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Our two classes, ESOL 2 and ESOL 3, started the project in late winter.

The ESOL 2 class studied the curriculum over a period of four months and covered the topics in the first three units of the curriculum: deciding to buy a home, finding one's dream house and getting a mortgage. The ESOL 3 class spent a shorter period of time with the curriculum but covered the same topics. Although we taught our classes separately, we shared ideas and collaborated on several joint activities. Since our teaching goal was to help students learn to navigate a system or, in this case, a number of interdependent mini-systems, we tried to incorporate real life activities outside of the classroom and to use students as experts and guides. We hoped to help students learn new vocabulary, strengthen their understanding of homebuying concepts and the basic process of homebuying in America, and to become more familiar with the special programs that exist for first time homebuyers both in Lynn and in the surrounding towns. We also hoped that students would be able to transfer the skills they learned from studying the homebuying system to other systems that they would have to negotiate. In other words, as well as learning how to navigate the complex and multi-faceted process of homebuying in the U.S., we also wanted to provide an opportunity for our students to explore the coping methods they rely on when they are confronted with a new problem or situation, especially when they must do so in a new language.

ESOL 2: Nancy's Class

The level 2 class was made up of students from the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, El Salvador, Brazil, Haiti, Vietnam, Russia, and Cambodia. Students ranged in age from 18 to 60. They had a broad range of literacy skills and a wide spectrum of experience in banking and in home ownership. For instance, one student had purchased a three-family house in Lynn a year ago. Several students had purchased and still own homes in their native countries. All but one student (a 60-year-old grandmother) hoped to one day buy a home in the United States. The following is a selection of some successful lessons on homebuying:

Home in my Own Country—Guided Imagery, Writing, and Discussion: In order to encourage students' English-based thought processes, we started the class with guided imagery. I lowered the lights while students put their heads down and closed their eyes in order to visualize their childhood homes. Following the guided imagery exercise, I conducted a guided writing activity. Then for the next class, students drew pictures or brought photographs of their houses in their own countries to share with other students in

small groups. This activity was very successful and provided good practice in conversation.

Find Someone Who.... Survey: The purpose of this activity was to get a feel for the students' experiences and desires around homebuying and finance. It was very enjoyable and gave all of us an idea of who the class's "experts" were on various topics. The format can be adapted to fit any topic. It also provides practice in asking yes-no questions.

Dramas, Dictations & Crossword Puzzles—Building Vocabulary and Spelling Skills: Since the terms "borrow" and "lend" were very difficult for students to comprehend, we developed guided classroom dramas to illustrate the different uses of the words. Also, each week I gave the students a list of ten new vocabulary words to study for a sentence dictation the following week. We often played warm-up word games to strengthen vocabulary retention. One such favorite was a game we called Guess The Category. To play, one student leaves the room while the teacher writes a category on the board. An example might be "Banking Terms." The student returns and sits with his/her back facing the board. The other students in the class shout out phrases like "checking account," "customer service representative," "canceled check," "teller" or "ATM machine." The student in the chair must come up with the category.

As we developed a larger homebuying vocabulary base to work with, I made crossword puzzles on the computer software crossword puzzle-maker, Wordcross. The use of crossword puzzles in the ESOL classroom is a very versatile and creative method of reinforcing vocabulary; students love it. And, as in many other instances, they worked together in pairs to complete it. (Wordcross: HI TECH, 202 Pelton Avenue, Santa Cruz, CA 95060 408-425-5654 \$44.95)

Money & Banking: Independent of the homebuying project, a center-wide Student Health Action Health Team program on stress was being held at Operation Bootstrap. During the course of the health team's project, it became clear that many ESOL students experienced one of their highest levels of stress when having to negotiate banking situations. Since one of my own teaching goals was to help students navigate financial systems and because more easily, students articulated as one of the most stressful experiences of ESOL students, I decided that for homework I would send everyone to a bank for practice. I also asked students to collect printed information about different checking and savings accounts at that bank. Those who were feeling really brave were encouraged to discuss accounts with the customer service representative. In preparation for the task, we had an in-class discussion about anxiety and how to cope with it. Students were encouraged to go in pairs to support one another, though surprisingly none did. In fact, the homework activity was not terribly

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successful, though it did lead to a wonderful discussion about why most people hadn't done the assignment and how the few that had successfully entered a bank had coped with the anxiety. One student got inside the bank and then left without getting anything. Another talked to the customer service representative and opened a checking account on the spot. We printed up information from one bank's brochure so that students could compare that bank's offerings with those of their own banks. Several students proved to be very savvy consumers. Some had even discovered the no-cost banking offered by a very reputable local credit union. This led to sophisticated discussion about the differences between credit unions and banks. Currently, several students are in the process of changing their accounts as a result of the discussion.

Our Dream Houses—Writing, Cutting, Pasting, and Guessing: Following the housing vocabulary activities, students wrote dream houses as assignment. And ing class, I ies of a real es-called *Homes of* that I had picked supermarket. houses were lo-New England, about their a homework as-for the follow-brought in cop-tate magazine *New England* up at the local Although the cated all over only a few were affordable. However, the enticing color photos did provide a jumping off point for students to think about their dream houses. First we browsed through the magazines to find our individual dream houses. Students cut out their pictures and pasted them on lined paper for a homework project in which they were to describe the houses they had chosen and explain why they had chosen them. At the beginning of the next class I hung up the homework pictures and descriptions and asked students to try to match their classmates to their dream houses. For a final product, we used pictures from the magazine to make our own picture dictionaries of various house styles—Victorians, Colonials, Town Houses, etc.

Playing With the Real Estate Ads: During three lessons, we used a regular weekly real estate flyer. In the first lesson student teams were assigned a fictionalized individual or family with particular housing needs and were charged with finding them a house that met their requirements and was in their price range. As a follow-up, we translated real estate abbreviations and euphemisms, such as "needs a little TLC" and "handyman special." Students asked about the term "de-leaded," which led to a discussion about the hazards of lead paint. We discussed the reasons why one Lynn realtor lists his Lynn properties as being, "near Salem," "near Peabody," or "close to the water, near Swampscott" rather than in Lynn, bringing a critical awareness into the reading of housing advertisements.



Getting a Mortgage: Using the flyers one last time, I asked each student to choose a house for himself/herself that was not necessarily a dream house, but rather a realistic option for the first house he/she might buy. Students pasted the pictures and information about these houses on worksheets. We then used calculators to figure out the cost of 5% and 3% down payments. A few students said they couldn't afford a house now anyway, so they would go for a dream house. Others scaled down their choices after they calculated down payment costs.

Using LOTUS 1-2-3 To Figure Monthly Mortgage Payments: A staff member brought in her Lotus 1-2-3 program so that students could figure out monthly mortgage payments for the houses they had chosen. We used a fixed 30-year mortgage program at a 7.25% interest rate. Using the Lotus software, students were also able to determine the total cost of the house over the 30-year period. Those who had time figured payments and overall costs for a 20-year mortgage as well. Every student loved this activity. The computer program worked like magic. Using it gave students a real feeling of power. For all students this was an excellent opportunity to practice reading large numbers in English and to learn a new computer skill.

The Hard Reality of the "28% Rule": We followed up the monthly mortgage payment calculation activity with yet another financial literacy lesson. Using a local bank's suggestion that one should not spend more than 28% of gross monthly income on mortgage payments, students figured out what their gross monthly income would have to be in order for them to make the mortgage payments on the houses they had chosen. This was a potent reality check for students who held out the hope of buying single family houses in the near future.

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ESOL 3: Dulany's Class

As a starting point for our exploration, my classes used parts of the FannieMae Foundation's ESOL curriculum, *How to Buy a Home in the United States*. We started with a broad discussion about housing considerations, based loosely on Unit 2, Lesson 1, "Deciding What You Want." By the time we were ready to move on, the student workbooks had arrived and we were ready to work with all four lessons in Unit 1 and Unit 3, Lesson 1, "What You Should Know about Mortgage Loans." Though we were able to complete these lessons, we have not yet had a chance to finish the evaluative component of the curriculum. Before we finish the unit, I hope to conduct an in-class discussion and survey that assesses students' understanding of housing choices, banking and credit considerations, and the mortgage process.

As previously mentioned, the staff at Operation Bootstrap chose to implement the standards of the Navigating Systems strand, and the students voted to study the homebuying curriculum as a way to fulfill that strand of the ESOL curriculum frameworks. After a few classes with the project, Nancy and I realized with horror what an immense project we had agreed to tackle. As we considered how much time it would take for the students to meet their goal of learning enough about homebuying to be of more than passing interest, we each questioned the wisdom of dedicating so much class time to a topic that was, for at least some of the students, too dense, too intricate and, perhaps, too premature. My response to this dilemma was to weave other standards from the ESOL Frameworks into the homebuying curriculum unit. Parts of the two language strands of the Curriculum Frameworks, "Language Structure and Mechanics" and "Oral and Written Communications," were already touched on by activities that we used from the FannieMae curriculum, such as conversation with classmates, reading and writing activities, vocabulary building, and grammar review. I decided to incorporate several other areas of concentration as well: intercultural comparisons, technology, using others inside and outside of class as resources for learning, risk taking, and using authentic materials wherever possible. Below are some of the highlights of these crosscutting themes.

Culture: Before the class dived into the topic of homebuying, I decided that the students and I should discuss the general content and intention of the overall curriculum framework. I briefly outlined the five strands and then announced that the teachers had decided to teach a Navigating Systems unit. I drew a "mind map" with the words "Navigating Systems" in the center of the blackboard.



We started with the word "navigating." Students examined the idea behind the word. Was it the same as driving? Could a passenger navigate? Did a vehicle have to be involved? In the end, we decided that the core idea behind the word "navigating" was the ability to give directions for how to get somewhere. Next, we moved on to the word "systems." We compared various systems that were different here in the United States from those in the students' countries of origin. The list was broader than imagined—everything from how to cope with school closings, clothing to the able ways of the and Naturalization Service. We decided that the homebuying curriculum touched on two of the systems: "housing considerations" and "finances in America." After the students identified these two important systems within the larger one of homebuying, we agreed that the financial system touched everyone and was, therefore, useful even to those who had no interest in homebuying.



More than half of the class had lived in either their parents' or their own homes before coming to the United States, and most hoped, someday, to own a home. But none had ever encountered a homebuying system like ours. To begin with, buying a home for cash was the only homebuying system that they were familiar with, and consequently, they were very eager to understand the American banking/credit/mortgage process. Learning about housing issues *per se* was less of a concern to the students. Later, when we were well into the money and financing part of the unit, the students responded to a reading/writing assignment about the myth that all Americans are wealthy. The excerpt reminds students that they learn about America through media images. The question asks students to reflect about whether or not this country is in fact as wealthy as it is portrayed and whether the student feels like he or she is "richer or poorer in the United States" than he/she was in his/her country. The assignment was taken from a textbook entitled *Face to Face: Communication, Culture, and Collaboration* by Virginia Vogel Sanger (Heinle & Heinle, 1993). Their writings contained insightful reflections on what they had come to realize about the value of money in both the United States and in their own countries. Their paragraphs also revealed so much about the role that money does, or doesn't play, in each of their personal value systems.

As a class, we also looked at images of housing and wealth in the United States. This activity was inspired by the viewing of the movie *El Norte* and it prompted reflection and discussion about how American culture and its economy was portrayed in the mass media. Students cut out pictures of house interiors from magazines and answered the following question: What did you think houses in the United States were like before you actually came here? Students captioned

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the pictures with the generalizations that might be drawn from them. The following are examples of their summaries: "It looks like all the houses are beautiful and have a big garden." "It looks like all the kitchens are big and neat." "There are fresh breads and a big refrigerator."

Technology: Several of our activities were performed on computers. Although these activities represent exposure to a couple of computer applications rather than mastery of any one application, the activities were rewarding experiences for the students. To begin with, the students used a spreadsheet to make a chart of housing-related words. As headings, all of the students used categories that we brainstormed as a class, such as "neighborhood," "rooms," "outside," "furniture," "systems," and "financial." Then, working in pairs, the students entered words under each heading. Before files, they wandered around the computer lab and looked at each others' work for more ideas. The students returned to their spreadsheets the next week during their computer time-slot to add to their lists before spell-checking and printing them out.

When this part of the activity was finished, the students used a word processor to write a letter to a credit bureau, requesting a copy of their credit history. They followed a format suggested by a local TV channel: Full Name, Date of Birth, Social Security Number, Spouse's Name, Spouse's Social Security Number, Five Years of Previous Addresses, Current Employer, Day Phone Number, and Evening Phone Number. They then used the cut-and-paste tool on the computer to revise their letters. Students who had a credit history made copies of a utility bill or driver's license to establish their identity and then mailed the letters, but even those who had no credit history chose to go through the entire process. They sent their requests for credit histories to the following companies: Equifax, P.O. Box 740241, Atlanta GA 30374-0241; Experian (formerly TRW,) P.O. Box 2104, Allen TX 75013-0949; Trans Union Corp., 760 W. Sproul Road, Springfield PA 19064-0390.

After they sent their letters, the students used Lotus' amortization calculators to generate figures that were then plugged into a spreadsheet that I had built (i.e., the spreadsheet contained cells that I had already defined with numeric functions). The purpose of this activity was to explore the effect of the variables of term and interest rate on the monthly payments and total "lifetime" interest of a particular mortgage. For the final step, the students used both handheld and computer calculators to figure out down payments as actual percentages of the selling price.

Although we have not yet used the homebuying re-

sources available on the World Wide Web, I'm hoping that we will have time enough to explore some of them. I've reviewed the following Web sites and believe they each provide a good jumping off point to beginning Internet users who are interested in learning more about homebuying:

- <<http://www.fanniemae.com>> (Among other things the FannieMae site includes calculators and text explaining the homebuying process.)
- <<http://www.homepath.com/hsp1.html>>
- <<http://www.freddiemac.com/homebuyers>> (This includes a great home inspection kit.)
- <<http://www.bankrate.com>> (If you go to the sidebar category RATES and select HOME, you can learn about various mortgage rates and programs.)

[Part II of this article, which will appear in our next issue, will continue to discuss the themes of Dulany's class, review some of Nancy and Dulany's combined-class homebuying readiness activities, and discuss their reflections on the project.]

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Nancy Coffey and Dulany Alexander both teach ESOL at Operation Bootstrap in Lynn.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

MATSOL Conference Springs Ahead

MATSOL is holding its "spring" conference this year on Friday, January 21, and Saturday, January 22, at the University of Massachusetts/Boston in Dorchester. Presentations will focus on five areas: Standards, Technology, Language Learning Research, Professional Development, and Culture and Diversity. For information on the conference, e-mail Rob Vitello (RVitello@cbwl.org) or Carol Allen (ceallen@bu.edu) or call Carol at 617-353-4870.

Civic Participation/Community Action Sourcebook

Looking for ways to prepare adults to be more active in their communities? *The Civic Participation and Community Action Sourcebook*, published by the New England Literacy Resource Center, is a new 218-page resource that can help you integrate civic involvement and community activism into your adult education curriculum. It contains 20 narrative accounts, written mostly by teachers, that are organized by type of civic participation, including Holding Decision-Makers Accountable, Building Community by Helping Others, Expressing Ourselves and Educating Others, and Organizing for Change. Supplementing each account are "prep and practice" activities that develop the skills, knowledge, and confidence needed to engage in similar kinds of community involvement. The price is \$10/copy, including shipping. To order send your name, mailing address, and phone number, along with a check made out to NELRC/World Education, to: Amanda Darling, World Education, 44 Farnsworth St., Boston, MA 02210 (fax 617-482-0617).

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represent providers of ALBE throughout the state of Victoria. Our main aims are to provide policy advice and lobbying around ALBE issues and to link dispersed ALBE centres through professional development services such as an annual conference, professional development networks, and publications (the quarterly journal *Fine Print*, the VALBEC Newsletter, the *VALBEC Directory of Language and Literacy Providers*, and occasional papers).

Linking such a geographically dispersed field is no easy task. Victoria has a population of something like five million people, with providers stretching from Mildura (about 700 km to Melbourne's northwest) to Mallacoota (roughly 500 km to the east). As you can imagine, there are a range of different needs across such an area. City providers, although this varies across suburbs, have high rates of ESL as well as ALBE provision whereas rural centres are much more likely to exclusively provide ALBE for speakers of English as a first language—although there are a number of fruit-growing areas which attracted ESL speakers in the immigration “boom” of the 1950s and '60s and which have significant ESL/Literacy needs.

Classes are held in a number of different venues. Language and/or Adult Education Departments in Institutes of Technical and Further Education (TAFEs—similar I think to the US community college system) are a major provider of classes. They have the advantage of linking learners into other vocational courses run by TAFE and smoothing the transition back into mainstream education. As in Boston, Victoria also has a well established community sector which provides classes in “Neighbourhood Houses” or “Community Learning Centres” (the naming is significant for funding reasons which are too arcane to go into here). These classes might be held in converted houses, local libraries, converted shop fronts or in local halls. TAFEs tend to have access to better educational resources, such as campus libraries, computer facilities and general classroom space, but the neighbourhood centres are smaller and generally more “user friendly” for those more wary of the education system. Neighbourhood provision is also more adaptable as communities shift; in Melbourne, for example, there has been considerable outer urban growth in recent years and it is community centres which have been first to provide classes there. As well as these, there is a good deal of workplace-based ESL and ALBE training going on. This might be in the form of classes for workers in which the focus is on general language and literacy needs (albeit with materials based on specific workplace practice) or, increasingly, there is lan-

guage and literacy support for workers attempting to gain workplace certificates.

Funding comes from both federal and state governments. This funding was relatively stable throughout the '80s and up to the early '90s (i.e. it wasn't much, but it was regular), but due to changes at both levels of government and consequent changes in funding priorities, the field has been quite volatile throughout the '90s. There was an initial spurt of funding in the early '90s. The International Year of Literacy (1990) provided a community focus on literacy issues and certainly smoothed the way for changes that literacy workers had been advocating for some years; however, a large part of the funding changes were linked to a national policy on industry restructuring. As key employment industries—Victoria has an above-average share of manufacturing output in Australia—sought productivity gains and reduced staff, funding was quite dramatically increased for re-training.

As a consequence, the field grew from one largely operating out of small community centres and staffed

mainly by volunteers to one quite central to Australian public policy and increasingly professionalised. Among other things, this professionalisation (and increasing government scrutiny) led to calls for curriculum frameworks which would allow for greater consistency of ALBE provision. For practitioners, this was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the resulting *Certificates of General Education for Adults* (CGEA—pronounced something like “seejah” by those who know it) grew out of existing good practice and provided a useful guide for those teachers entering the field. Also, as the CGEA was introduced, there was a concomitant injection of professional development funding—the like of which the field had not seen before—and ALBE workers were increasingly discussing their work together. The growth of university graduate programmes specialising in adult language and literacy added to the depth and scope of debates within the field.

However, government demands for accountability led to the addition of nominal hours for completion of the various stages of the CGEA, i.e., if someone remained enrolled in the same level for longer than their allotted time, funding could be withdrawn. As you're aware, learners don't all learn at the same rate, and this requirement led to many imaginative deceptions so that students could remain in classes. (I should add that, though this standardisation took some getting used to, the CGEA has been flexible enough to allow for a broad range of teaching initiatives and a recent survey suggests that it is generally accepted as a useful planning framework.)

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The nature of the field was altered considerably by two key changes in government policy in the mid '90s. Firstly, as part of their policy for the rationalisation of public expenditure, the Victorian state government instituted Compulsory Competitive Tendering, under which all government programmes had to be put out for tender. ["For bid," I think we would say here.—Ed.] The theory was that this would lead to a reduction of "the fat" in the system. Certainly it led to cheaper provision of ALBE, but safeguards to ensure the quality of provision were less than rigidly enforced, and there has been considerable concern in the field that tenders have been won based solely on cost rather than on an understanding of the deeper educational issues (although this would doubtlessly be denied by the then-government). Another upshot of this change has been that the field has become increasingly casualised and deprofessionalised—attempts by teacher organisations to require that all ALBE staff have a teaching qualification were ignored in government tender documents—so that teachers are increasingly likely to be working at multiple sites with few workplace protections and benefits. Those who have some tenure are teaching longer and have more responsibilities.

The other bracing experience was the change of government at the federal level in 1996. Based on a much repeated need to repair a gaping "black hole" left in the economy by the previous government, there were funding cuts across the board in education and other public services. Funding was redirected from the unemployed in general—a lot of these being older migrants made redundant by industry restructuring—to the young unemployed in particular, i.e., those aged from 16 to 25. As school retention rates dropped and youth unemployment increased, this was a necessary focus that few questioned. Yet, as fate would have it, the take-up rate by youth for the literacy training (it was one of a number of options) was so low that the age range for training had to be raised to fill the classes.

So, it's been a tough time in Victorian ALBE recently (and I should add that the federal system here leads to sometimes considerable differences between the various states), and what happens in the next funding round is anybody's guess. ALBE appears to be something of a black hole in policy terms; repeated attempts to get either of the major political parties to state a clear commitment to the field have been fruitless. But, for all the doubts expressed here, ALBE provision continues to adapt to changing times, teachers continue to create innovative curriculum materials, and learners continue to learn. New partnerships between adult education and the schools sector—for example, some classes provided for "students at risk" within the school programme and some classes held out of school but accredited within the school—are one particular area being developed at the moment. We continue to lobby and wait for the political tide to turn.

WIA & NRS: HELPING OR HURTING ADULT LEARNERS?

by Archie Willard

[The following is an abridged version of a December, 1999, posting to the NLA listserv by Archie Willard, President of VALUE, a national organization of adult learners.]

The federal government has recently introduced two policies which affect the adult basic education field. The Workforce Investment Act requires adult education programs to cooperate more closely with job-training programs. For an ABE program to be funded, it must show that its learners achieve the following types of goals: a) get a job, b) earn a GED, or c) help their children succeed in school. The National Reporting System will require programs to use a new way to report the skills that adult learners possess. This reporting system will have several levels of skill achievement. For a program to get funding, it must show that its learners are moving up through those levels. VALUE is concerned about these new policies because:

1. About 40 to 45 million U.S. adults have very low levels of basic skills. Many of these adults are learning disabled. Many of them are immigrants with limited English skills. These adults need special adult education services if they are to meet the goals specified in the WIA and NRS.

2. Many adult education programs will likely avoid serving those 40-45 million lowest-skilled adults. These programs will be afraid that they won't be able to demonstrate the outcomes required by the WIA and NRS. They will instead select the "cream" of the population of adult learners (those with higher skill levels, those without learning disabilities, those immigrants who already speak English). Programs will do this so they can meet the goals set by Congress and therefore qualify for federal and state money. This means that the lowest-skilled learners won't get the services they need.

3. Some states are now focusing their resources on testing and reporting rather than improving the quality of adult education programs (through teacher training, etc.) and serving more learners. These states are making this shift from teaching to reporting because they think that this is what Congress and the Workforce Investment Act want.

4. Many states are relying heavily on standardized tests to measure the literacy levels of adult learners. These tests produce scores which can be added up and reported to the federal government and other funders. Unfortunately, those standardized tests often don't measure the kinds of skills and knowledge that adult learners are looking for. (For example, an adult learner might need to be able to read the computer screen she uses at work, or deal with insurance forms, or use English to speak to his boss or his child's teacher.) Standardized tests aren't designed to measure the specific skills and

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knowledge which adult learners work on in their basic skills programs. Therefore, many learners get the skills they seek to improve their lives without necessarily scoring high or advancing a level on standardized tests. And, worse yet, many adult learners find standardized tests to be either meaningless or threatening—or both! This can lead some learners to be discouraged or even drop out. Adult educators have been developing new forms of assessment which can be used to measure how well learners are meeting their individual goals. Policy makers should encourage adult educators to develop and use these new kinds of measures. This will allow everyone to get accurate information about what is really being achieved in basic skills programs.

5. Some of the dropouts from adult education programs have learning disabilities which are never diagnosed. They drop out because the work expected of them is too difficult. With the proper assessment tools, learning disabilities could be identified early and dropout rates reduced.

VALUE is pleased that policy makers are trying to make adult education programs more relevant and accountable, but we are concerned about these new policies.

NEWS FROM THE A.L.R.I.

Pick Up Copies of Connections: Taking Risks

The recently-published issue of the A.L.R.I.'s adult literacy journal, *Connections*, focuses on the theme of taking risks as teachers in the classroom and includes articles by Sharon Carey, Marie Hassett, Charissa Ahlstrom, Martha Merson, Adam Ross, Anson Green, Dianne Roy, Joanne Arnaud, Felipe Vaquerano, Nancy Teel, and Christine Luth. We urge you to pick up copies for yourself and for others at your program next time you're here at the A.L.R.I.

New Resources in the Library

The A.L.R.I. library has recently added David Macauley's video *Pyramid* to its collection, giving ABE teachers and classes an opportunity to connect with the Egypt-focused exhibits and performances at the Museum of Science, the Museum of Fine Arts, the Boston Lyric Opera, and the Boston Ballet. *Pyramid* explores the geography, history, archaeology, mythology, and religions of the ancient Egyptians through both animation and live footage. Call Sandra at 782-8956, ext. 19, to preview or reserve this 60-minute video.

Adult Literacy Resource Institute

989 Commonwealth Avenue
Boston, MA 02215

*Massachusetts
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