

**Adult
Literacy
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*A project of the
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all write news

THE THINKING GED CLASSROOM

by Barbara Wickwire and Wendy Quiñones

[Last year the authors, who teach at the Community Learning Center in Cambridge, received a mini-grant from the A.L.R.I. to begin working on a curriculum development project focused on integrating critical thinking with GED preparation. The following article contains excerpts from their report summarizing the work they had done, which they envisioned as just the beginning of a more extensive project. Due to space limitations, this article omits most the detailed sections of the report dealing with implementing the lessons the authors developed, as well as the actual texts of the materials they used in the activities. This information can be found in their report, The Thinking GED Classroom, available in the A.L.R.I. library.—Ed.]

The idea for this curriculum developed out of our desire not only to prepare our students for the GED but also to give them skills for critical thinking and understanding that they can take beyond the classroom and into their lives. We thought that the best way to do this was to focus on teaching thinking skills and dispositions, and on applying these to produce understanding across disciplines and content areas. One of the touchstones of our teaching philosophy is the constructivist notion that students must be active learners. In order to make meaning and connections, students must do the work to be engaged in the process of problem-solving and thinking critically and creatively. They inevitably make their own meanings in life—no one can avoid doing that—but the question is whether they simply accept whatever floats their way or whether they make meaning consciously, critically, and with intention. We also believe that calling on student experience enriches the process of meaning-making.

However, what we see in our students is that they have seldom been exposed to this kind of learning environment. They have not been expected to make their own meaning in the classroom, they have not been asked to reflect on their actions and ways of thinking, most don't want to do the work involved, and most resist it when we ask them to. Most of our students

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A.L.R.I. UPDATE

by Steve Reuys

Some of our alert readers may have noticed a brief article a couple of months ago in the *Boston Globe*, describing a new city initiative called the Family Justice Center, a multi-service center for victims of domestic violence, sexual abuse, and child abuse scheduled to open in the spring of 2004, and some may have even noted its location: 989 Commonwealth Avenue. This of course is the building in which the A.L.R.I. is currently located, but in a few months it will be serving the city in this new capacity, and the A.L.R.I. will have been moved to a new location, probably on the main campus of the University of Massachusetts Boston in Dorchester. We're not yet sure when our move will actually take place or just where we will be moving to, but we're in the process of talking about all this with folks at the university and we hope to have some more definite answers within a couple of months.

In the meantime, until we do move to our new home, we expect to be continuing to operate out of our current location. Renovations will presumably be taking place within the building, and we're not yet sure what impact that may have on us and on our services, but we hope to be able to work things out with the new occupants so that there will be as little disruption as

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**Please share this newsletter
with others at your program.
The deadline for submitting
material for the next issue is:
April 1.**

Happy New Year!

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desist at the first encounter of difficulty or of effort required. Most look for the first easy answer; if that is not the correct one, or if no answer is immediately apparent, most are baffled and unable to go further. Most are unwilling to take intellectual risks. Most have little awareness of or tolerance for ambiguity or multiple solutions or viewpoints. Further, most have no ability to judge the validity of any viewpoint, even their own; evaluation of the reliability of sources or the soundness of arguments is something they have seldom if ever been expected or taught to do.

This project represents a start at crafting a curriculum that is responsive to the immediate need of GED students to pass the test, while taking a proactive approach to developing the critical and creative thinking skills they need for their futures. Habits of effort and perseverance, of active



curiosity, of fluency and flexibility of thinking, of reflection and thoughtful action, so often foreign to our students, are among the thinking skills and dispositions that will be infused in our curriculum and taught systematically in the classroom. These will be applied across content areas and revisited at different levels of difficulty in what Ennis (1987) calls "spiral curriculum fashion." Based on constructivist philosophy, our curriculum incorporates the thinking tools and dispositions, the habits of mind, necessary for reflective lifelong learning.

The GED is explicitly a test of thinking skills, based on Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives. However, our experience with GED preparation materials is that most are content-driven with thinking skills more or less grafted on: sets of materials are divided into content areas first (Social Studies, Science, and so on), and thinking areas second. In our compressed time frame of one semester final GED preparation, focusing on content is a near-impossible task. How-

ever, we also believe that test preparation is not the best preparation for lifelong learning. We believe that for both tasks, thinking skills must be addressed primarily, with content used as a vehicle for teaching them. We have begun to devise a GED curriculum in which thinking skills are developed not only within disciplines but across them, preparing GED students to transfer this learning outside the classroom into the ambiguity of life.

In our own practice of developing our lessons, we use the skills contained in Bloom's Taxonomy to prepare students for the GED. But for our own goals of critical and creative thinking, we also incorporate theoretical frameworks from other scholars and researchers. We have integrated constructivist practices that offer specific strategies for developing critical and creative ways of thinking.

In our lessons, we separate the phases of learning into preparation, engagement, and reflection. Preparation includes the necessary first step of making a safe environment for students to feel that they are valued, that they can learn, and that they can safely take risks. Engagement includes lessons rich in active thinking skills and strategies, repeated and reinforced so that they become habit. Reflection, taught explicitly and performed systematically, permits students to apply and transfer these skills into their own lives.

Each of the three lessons we offer here represents one of these phases of learning. While they cross the content areas of literature and history, they are thematically unified by a common thread: the concept of story. In the preparation phase, we begin with each student's story in a lesson involving their names. For engagement, we move into an inquiry of how history is created by stories, using the example of Lexington Green. Finally, we reflect on stories taken from the works of Maya Angelou and Eudora Welty, using both historical and literary tools both to examine them as literature and to set them in historical and social context. In this final stage, students reflect on the cultural and historical forces that shaped the authors' lives and transfer that understanding to their own. Finally, each lesson concludes with a teacher reflection on the process.

Each lesson also moves through the three phases of learning, and, in spiral fashion, each lesson successively deepens the exercise of thinking skills. In all the lessons our practice reflects the recent findings of cognitive psychology that people learn best when settings are varied: thinking alone, thinking in small groups, and thinking in large groups. In the spirit of the action-reflection cycle, we conclude our project with our own journal reflections on this process.

These lessons and reflections show the beginning of our work in developing a semester-long curriculum of GED preparation. The lessons reflect coordination with the ABE Frameworks, as well as consideration of the Equipped for the Future standards. In our continuing work, we will produce more lessons which follow the structure and philosophy we have outlined here.

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LESSON 1: SEEING THROUGH NAMES

This lesson introduces students to us and to each other, as well as to the ways in which our classroom will operate differently from others they may have been in. In this lesson we are concerned with starting the creation of a classroom community in which students feel safe enough to exercise the unfamiliar thinking skills and dispositions which they will be learning.

Our students tend to arrive in class with standard, stereotyped ideas about what should happen in a classroom: teachers teach largely boring and irrelevant material, which students will remember with the least possible effort for only as long as it takes them to be tested on it. We rather different ideas, and we make this point from our very first moments with students. In this unit, we introduce them to the idea that they will in large measure direct the learning that goes on, that their engagement in unusual and unfamiliar ways is part of the process, and that their own experience will be both a resource to draw upon and the material of learning itself.

The unit has three main components. First, in order to begin creating a safe community in which students feel able to work together on challenging tasks, we use an active, engaging game to help students learn each others' names. Second, beginning what will be the systematic process of reflecting on experience, we reflect on the game and brainstorm ideas for why it worked as a learning activity. We discuss these ideas and how they might apply to our classroom. Third, we introduce the "think, pair, share" strategy to have students tell the stories behind their names, introducing them also to the sharing and feedback rules that enhance the safety of student interaction.

Thinking Skills and Dispositions: In this lesson, students begin the process of thinking in different ways for different purposes. They practice open-mindedness in accepting the notion that a silly-appearing game can help them learn; they cooperate with others at first in playing the game and later in reflecting as a group upon their experience. They analyze it for its various components and make evaluations about which of these enhanced their learning. They practice flexibility in applying their insights to classroom operations, synthesizing in the process a new kind of classroom environment. Finally, they make considerable effort to create the stories of their names, and they take risks in sharing them.



LESSON 2: SEEING LEXINGTON GREEN: WHO FIRED THE FIRST SHOT?

How do we know who fired the first shot that started the Revolutionary War? How do historians know? In this lesson we look for evidence the way an historian might, examining conflicting accounts of the same event. Rather than dull textbook accounts we use authentic, first-person testimony, as well as historians' documents in an inquiry about that fateful day on Lexington Green in Lexington, Massachusetts, that began the fight for freedom and democracy.

This engagement lesson has four main components which will probably take one 90-minute class. First, students participate in an expert/novice exercise, practicing thinking in the way an historian might, to come to thoughtful conclusions based on evidence. Second, in thinking like an historian, students examine different points of view to corroborate evidence, to contextualize, and to consider the source. Third, this lesson is an introduction into flexibility of thinking, crossing disciplines, a first step to a subsequent lesson which addresses the literary skills of comparing and contrasting, evaluation, and examining points of view, skills that have implications for the GED tests and beyond. Fourth, students practice the skills of thinking alone, thinking in pairs (or threes), and thinking in groups, which enriches their thinking and learning. Students will come to understand that history is not always clean, that history is a process of interpretation as well as a narrative of events.

Thinking Skills and Dispositions: As part of thinking activities that occur in many lessons, students think alone, in pairs (or threes) and in large groups. Students use the

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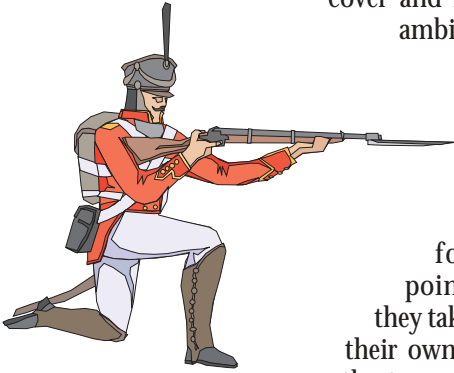
The *All Write News* is published every two months by the Adult Literacy Resource Institute/SABES Greater Boston Regional Support Center, which is primarily funded by the Massachusetts Department of Education and the Boston BRA/EDIC/ Jobs and Community Services Department. All signed articles represent the opinions of the individual authors and not necessarily those of the A.L.R.I. or its staff, nor does material included here necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Massachusetts Department of Education or the federal government.

Please send all material for the newsletter to the editor, Steve Reuys, at the A.L.R.I. (E-mail address: steve@alri.org; regular mail address: see last page of this issue. If sending by regular mail, please include, if possible, a computer disk (Mac or PC) with material saved as a "text only" document.) For more information or for permission to reprint articles, please call Steve at 617-782-8956 x14. Complete issues of this newsletter published since March, 1998, can be found in PDF format in the "Publications" section of our web page at: <http://www.alri.org>.

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thinking heuristics of an historian to find evidence, corroboration, documentation of sources, and contextualization. They actively read four accounts of this event. In their analysis, they discover and learn to tolerate ambiguity, learning to keep an open mind. They exercise flexibility of thinking as they evaluate four different points of view, and they take risks to present their own. They use empathy to understand the soldiers' points of view, and persevere to gain clarity about the event. They use the analytical skills of the historian to determine whether they can say for certain what happened.

**LESSON 3: SEEING THROUGH THE EYES OF OTHERS**

We continue in this lesson with our theme of stories as the foundation for students' meaning-making. This time we focus on building the skill of reflection. The Latin word *reflectare* means "to bend back." In reflection, we ask our students to look back to prior actions and ways of thinking, reconsidering them in the light of new insights, information, and strategies. By systematic and cyclical return to reflection, students internalize this way of thinking differently about their own experience with new perspectives and new tools.

One of the lesson's main objectives is to begin the process of crossing disciplines by taking tools from our history lesson and applying them to literature. In the history lesson, students used the historian's tools of corroborating evidence, considering the source, and contextualization to conduct a historical investigation. In this lesson, focused on literature, they use these as well as similar tools of literary criticism: comparing, considering sources, and evaluating. In the Lexington Green lesson, students examined the social context of the battle and individual witnesses' physical location—their literal point of view—during the event to determine what they could have seen; in this lesson, students consider the context of the times and the social location of the narrators to understand what they have seen—their literary point of view.

An equally important objective is to examine the literature in its own terms. What stories are the authors telling, and why? What are their similarities and differences? What devices have they used to create their intended effects? How are they like or unlike our own experiences?

There are five main components of this reflective phase lesson, which will probably take at least two 90-minute classes. First, students begin from authentic experience through a guided visualization of a store in their own experience to lead to the reading of stories based on stores by Eudora Welty and Maya Angelou. Next, for fluency, students freewrite about their memory and then share those memories with the class. After an active reading of the Welty and Angelou pieces, students compare and contrast each story and their own. Fourth, students are introduced to the concept of social location to enhance the understanding of point of view; we use an aspect of S.C.A.M.P.E.R (Eberle, 1971) synthesis strategy (modify, magnify, minify) to show how even the smallest detail can provide contextual evidence for the bigger picture. Finally, using these new tools to bring insights, students reflect upon their initial memories, seeking new points of view and new understandings.

Thinking Skills and Dispositions. In this lesson, students return to the historian's tools for an exercise in active reading and analysis of literary works. They also use the literary critic's tools, examining similarities and differences of the disciplines, as well as studying the writer's craft. From their analysis, they must infer information about the narrators and their social context. They conduct a self-inquiry, mining and reflecting upon their own memories. They practice flexibility and tolerance for ambiguity in using Eberle's SCAMPER tool of magnifying and minifying the details of social context they bring forth. They also examine the ambiguities involved in seeing the same situation through the eyes of both child and reflective adult. They take risks in sharing their memories and insights, and remain open-minded as they hear those of their classmates. Their reflection synthesizes their learning and their experience into new perspectives.

**REFLECTIONS (BY EACH AUTHOR)**

As Wendy and I conclude our three-lesson curriculum project, I look back on the experience as a grounding of mutual educational philosophy shaped into the practice of developing lessons. Our frameworks incorporate those that address the needs of the adult literacy student preparing for the GED. I look forward to further collaboration to take this grounding experience beyond the three lessons and complete a semester's worth of lessons.

In our desire to give students the best learning we can
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give them, we...—we have worked so well collaboratively that I have been thinking in “we” and now in this reflection I have to go back to “I”—I have found this experience a rewarding one in many senses, the balance of different kinds of strengths and weaknesses, the results made richer, I think, by our focus on meaning-making to inform the lessons with specific critical and creative ways of thinking.

As in the work for my synthesis project in the Critical and Creative Thinking Program at UMASS/Boston, I am amazed at the parallels of the process in preparing what we wanted to do for students and what we experienced in the execution. We were often in ambiguity—we, I should say I—felt comfortable as we went along in taking risks, trying new ideas, thinking flexibly in coming to our own understandings.

It is an illuminating experience to take theory, ideas that sound good, and then put those ideas into practice, always keeping in mind the kind of student we have: one who is either not comfortable with the school experience or angry about it, in any case with degrees of lack of confidence. In our transferring theory to practice, we first get the student to feel safe, and then to operate from his or her experience, laying foundations for the richest kind of learning experience we can give them. All of this is done with the idea of holding interest in a class, not giving too much to overwhelm, and feeling confident that what we have done reflects the work of a process, carefully thought out, and easier to implement, because of the careful work done in preparation.

This was an opportunity to sit back, think about and craft curriculum, taking time to sift through ideas and put them into practice. For me in some cases it meant taking intuition and putting it down in the hard light of day to see if an idea would work. In our collaborative effort, sometimes we would hone in and focus on a particular aspect at the same moment with the same thought. Or we might bring in an idea that would generate yet more ideas for what we were looking at. We both would go through a period of incubation, and then present new ideas to put into practice and then reflect on.

I really like using the richness of literature, art and his-

tory to show our students “how to see,” to deepen their understanding. In our future work I think we’ve got more to do, deeper to go in helping our students “to see.” In this parallel process we discover that ourselves.

—Barbara Wickwire

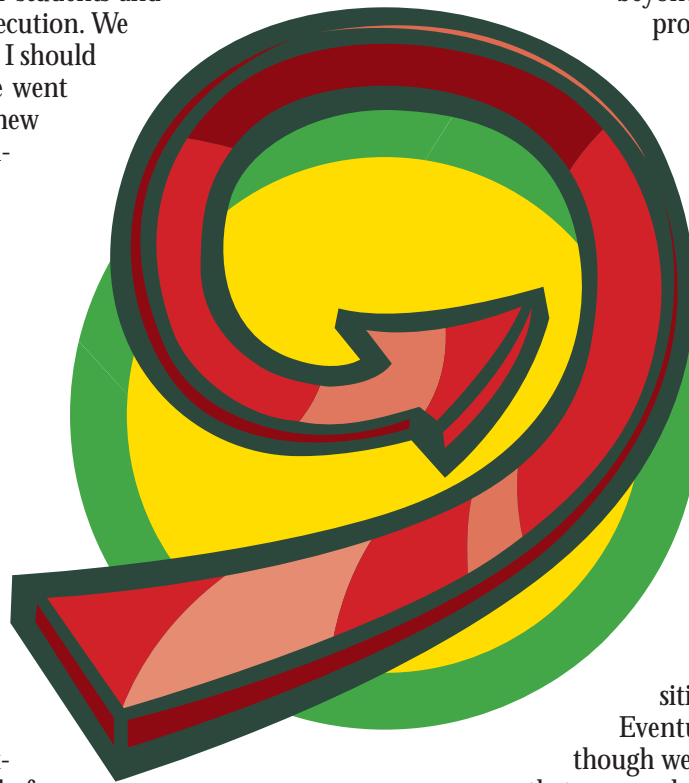
Putting these familiar lessons into the context of a curriculum based on thinking rather than content has had the effect of lifting a huge weight off my shoulders. In the past, the pressure of covering four GED content areas in one semester and the guilt of failing to get to them all have been constant tensions in my teaching and lesson planning. Committed as I am to teaching for purposes far beyond the GED, it has felt that I approached in only the most haphazard and opportunistic way the thinking skills and habits I want to inculcate in my students. This new curriculum feels like a structure that will enable me to resolve this tension, to shape both my sometimes overly-ambitious teaching goals and my students’ sometimes tunnel-vision focus on the GED.

Much of the ease I now feel comes, I think, from what Ennis describes as a “spiral curriculum.” While preparing these three lessons, we found ourselves at first trying to cram more and more into them so we wouldn’t miss any of the thinking skills and dispositions we want our students to learn.

Eventually, however, we realized—although we still struggle with the practice—that we needn’t rush to get them all into any given lesson, nor do we need to extend any lesson or materials beyond our students’ tolerance. We can simply move on to different content, choosing either to continue with the same thinking areas or moving on to different ones. We know that we will return to any important thinking areas, and that when we do our students will have added experience and deeper insight to bring to the tasks.

I am particularly excited about the reflection portion of every lesson. I believe strongly in Mezirow’s (1990) and Kegan’s (1994) emphasis on the adult’s task of examining how we know what we do and why we believe as we do. Reflection, systematically engaged in until it becomes habitual, is perhaps the most powerful tool for encouraging students to develop this critical stance toward their own experience and learning. The lack of this stance is, I think, one of the major attitudinal issues my students face as ob-

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stacles in their lives—they are by turns credulous or cynical, with neither state based on a firm foundation. But this critical stance is one that can be learned. Systematically recording student reflection in a journal gives us a way of assessing their development in this area throughout the year, and of knowing when and if we need to change our own practice in response to it.

I also look forward to producing a regular journal myself. Although this is not a practice I regularly engage in, when I have, it has been enormously productive for my teaching. With both a structural reason for doing so and a colleague to share it with, I think my own reflective and critical abilities will be enhanced along with my students'.

—Wendy Quiñones

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A.L.R.I. UPDATE

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possible for us, for you, and for our work together. There are likely to be some inconveniences, however, so we wanted to let you know now what's being planned for our building, and we'll try to keep you informed if there are any major changes in our situation here.

In other news, we want to announce—for those of you who don't already know—that we've hired a new Curriculum and Assessment Coordinator. His name is Richard

Rakobane and he comes to us with a great deal of experience in adult basic education, most recently at the Jamaica Plain Community Centers, where he is still teaching ESOL in the evenings. Richard has been working with our SABES Coordinator Maria Elena Gonzalez and others to learn the ins and outs of the whole assessment process, and as the year progresses he will be taking over more and more of the tasks and activities related to helping programs with assessment.

We have also hired a new Office Assistant, Shirley Tenique Williams, who, until recently, was working at the United South End Settlements. Among other things, Shirley Tenique will be handling registrations for all of our staff development activities, so please be sure to send in your registration forms to her and to call her if you have questions about your registrations.

Unfortunately, we have lost our Administrative Assistant, Tina Viggiano, who was with us for just about a year before deciding to leave for a different job. We want to thank Tina for her work during the past year and to wish her luck in her new position. A hiring process will get underway shortly, and if you know of anyone who may be interested, please have them contact us or visit the UMass Boston website, where the job will be posted.

The good-bye/thank you party for David Rosen that was held in the fall at Doyle's in Jamaica Plain was a huge success, both as a send-off party for David and as a fundraiser for the Boston Adult Literacy Fund. We want to thank all of you who came to the event and made donations to BALF, and we also want to thank a number of you who weren't able to attend but who made generous donations anyway. It was a tremendous gathering of mostly, but not entirely, adult basic education-related people, many of whom hadn't seen each other for years, and, as far as we could tell, a fun time was had by all.

Finally, a word on when the A.L.R.I. will be closing and/or canceling activities due to the weather this winter. With changes coming in the use of our building, the following policy may also wind up changing. But for now, this is our policy for this winter: 1) If UMass Boston is closed, the A.L.R.I. will be closed and any activities scheduled here for that day will be cancelled. 2) If the Boston Public Schools are closed but UMass Boston is open, the A.L.R.I. will be open but any activities scheduled here for that day will be cancelled. To check on cancellations and closures, you can: listen to the school closings in the morning on TV or radio to see if the Boston Public Schools or UMass Boston is closed; or call the A.L.R.I. at 617-782-8956 to see if there is a recorded message indicating that we are closed for the day or that a scheduled activity has been cancelled. If you have any doubts about coming in to an activity, please call ahead. We'll do our best to help you avoid wasted trips.

* * * * *

Steve Reuys is the Adult Literacy Resource Institute Coordinator.

FROM THE A.L.R.I. LIBRARY: BIBLIOGRAPHY ON FATHERING

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Curtis, Jane. *F.A.T.H.E.R.S.: Fathers as Teachers: Helping, Encouraging, Reading, Supporting*. California State Library Foundation. 1999. (Family Literacy Files). The FATHERS Program helps prison inmates to be aware of their responsibility to help break family cycles of low literacy and incarceration. Components of the program include class instruction.

Miller, E. Ethelbert. *Fathering Words: the Making of an African American Writer*. St. Martin's Press. (PS 3563 .I3763 Z465 2000). Miller, a writer, a poet and a father tells how love survived in his family and how it shaped his life.

This is a sample listing of books and materials on this topic available in the Boston SABES/A.L.R.I. Library and other SABES Resource Centers. More resources exist on this topic. Please contact us about these or other materials.

—Sandra Darling, A.L.R.I. Librarian



FOR YOUR INFORMATION

THE LINCS GRANTS AND FUNDING DATABASE

The NIFL (National Institute for Literacy) LINCS Grants and Funding database contains information about the latest grants and funding opportunities for adult and family literacy programs available from federal, state, and local governments, private industry, foundations, and other funding sources. To access this database, go to <<http://www.nifl.gov/lincs>> and then click on Grants and Funding.

FUTURE OF NIFL IN DOUBT

Messages to the AAACE-NLA discussion list have reported that NIFL (the National Institute for Literacy) is in danger of losing its adult literacy focus as a result of the WIA reauthorization process, thus putting at risk all the various adult literacy-focused initiatives supported by NIFL. A national campaign has been launched to preserve NIFL's adult literacy-oriented mission. To find out more about the situation and about how you can get involved, visit <<http://www.altn.org/>> and click on the "NIFL Info" button. To subscribe to the AAACE-NLA discussion list, visit: <http://lists.literacytent.org/mailman/listinfo/aaace-nla>.

JOB ANNOUNCEMENTS

If your program has a job opening, we urge you to do BOTH of the following: 1) Send—by mail, fax (782-9011), or e-mail (sandra@alri.org)—a copy of your job announcement to the A.L.R.I. for posting in our Job Listings Book; and 2) Post your job announcement to the ABE Boston e-mail listserv. To post a message to this listserv, you need to join the list. We hope you've already done so, but if you haven't, look on page 8 of this newsletter for the address of the website where you can join. After you join, you'll receive instructions on how to post a message. (You're also welcome to come in to the A.L.R.I. to take a look at our Resume Book to see who's out there looking for jobs.)

And, if you're looking for a job in the field of adult basic education in this region, we also urge you to do BOTH of the following: 1) Come in to the A.L.R.I. to take a look at our Job Listings Book; and 2) Join the ABE Boston e-mail listserv to receive notices of job openings posted by programs in this area. If you haven't already joined the list, look on page 8 of this newsletter for the address of the website where you can join. (You can also send us—by mail, fax (782-9011), or e-mail (sandra@alri.org)—a copy of your resume for posting in our Resume Book.)

Sign Up for the ABE Boston E-mail List!

The new ABEBoston listserv allows ABE practitioners and programs in the Boston region to get information out to one another and to receive information about events,

job postings, and other items relevant to practitioners in this area. We hope you've already signed up, but if not we encourage you to do so now. To join the list, go to: <<http://lists.literacytent.org/mailman/listinfo/abeboston>>.



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*Massachusetts
Readers: Please
Open Promptly—*

*Announcements
of Upcoming
Staff Development
Activities at the
A.L.R.I. Enclosed*