Curriculum development for adult literacy programs

Susan Malone

In programs that consider learning to be a self-directed, participatory process, curriculum and instructional methods are designed to help learners achieve their personal goals for literacy. Decisions about curriculum and instruction, therefore, take into account general characteristics of adult learners:

They possess a great deal of experience and knowledge relating to a variety of topics, are aware of their own problems, and have their own educational goals.

They do not learn the same way children do and do not want to be taught the same way children are taught.

They have many responsibilities and do not want to be involved in activities that they feel are a waste of time.

They may be uninterested in individualized learning and uncomfortable in competitive situations or conversely, they may enjoy competition and learn best on their own.

They may lack self-esteem because of their inability to use print media, because they have had previous unsuccessful school experiences, because of their low social status or—if they are members of an ethnic minority—because of the low status of their language and culture.

In addition to these general characteristics, adult learners come to literacy classes with different levels of proficiency in reading, writing, and numeracy and, in some cases, speaking a language that is different from the language of formal education.

Clearly, there is no one, "generic" curriculum that will be suitable for every group of learners. The process of curriculum development, then, begins by learning about the learners themselves and identifying what they want to learn. During the planning phase, efforts are made to determine the prospective learners' educational goals —the reasons why they want to become literate. Women in a rural village in Asia, for example, might want to read, write, and calculate so that they can start and maintain an income-generating project. These women's educational goals would be to be able to keep business records and to maintain their own bank accounts.

If the learners' educational goals answer the question "why," the curriculum answers the question "what". Although there are many differing definitions of curriculum, the term here refers to the organized collection of intended learning outcomes—the knowledge, skills,
attitudes, and behaviors that will enable adult learners' to achieve their educational goals\textsuperscript{1}. Intended learning outcomes for the rural Asian women would be the specific knowledge and skills relating to reading, writing and numeracy that will be necessary for them to keep business records and maintain bank accounts.

Implied in this definition of curriculum is the possibility that the set of intended learning outcomes may be inadequate—that even though the learners gain the knowledge and skills prescribed in the curriculum, they still may be unable to meet their educational goals. Curriculum development, then, requires on-going evaluation of learning outcomes to see if the curriculum truly is enabling learners to achieve their educational goals. If the intended learning outcomes are achieved but the educational goals have not been reached, the curriculum needs to be revised.

If the educational goals answer the question "why", and the curriculum answers the question "what", the \textbf{instructional method} answers the question "how". The instructional method includes all the \textbf{planned learning activities} that are used to achieve the intended learning outcomes. For example, if a Freirian approach is used, one of the instructional methods might involve dialogue between learners, facilitated by their teacher, about an economic, social, or political concern the learners have identified.\textsuperscript{2}

This distinction between educational goals, curriculum, and instructional method helps explain their different functions but in practice the three are usually not so clearly separated. Educational goals influence curriculum development, which, in turn, influences decisions about which instructional method will be used.

The approach that literacy providers take to curriculum and instruction is influenced by their own perceptions of "literacy". On the one hand are those who consider literacy to be a technology that literate people use for their own purposes. Based on that point of view, becoming literate is an \textit{educational} process, but not necessarily a \textit{political} one. Curriculum and instructional methods are meant to help adult learners acquire the technical skills and behaviors that the providers consider essential to reading and writing fluency. The assumption is that having gained the essential technical skills, the learners will be able to use the skills for their own specific purposes.

An alternative approach to literacy is based on the assumption that the process by which people learn to read, write, and calculate influences the way they will use reading, writing, and


numeracy in their lives. Those who take this approach argue that curriculum and instructional methods should grow out of the learners' social context and immediately should begin encouraging them to think about the ways they can use literacy to solve the problems they have identified and achieve their personal goals. Curricula and instructional methods that are meant, for example, to help adult learners improve their income-earning potential would be different from those meant to help them gain access to their religion's sacred writings or to communicate their community's needs more effectively to governmental agencies.

**Planning for curriculum development.** If there are not enough specialists to prepare curriculum for each group of learners (i.e., rural and urban, women and men, those interested in using literacy to communicate with relatives and those wanting to establish a business cooperative), curriculum frameworks developed at sub-national, national, and international levels can be adapted to the educational goals of the different learning groups. A curriculum framework is a pattern or outline that helps teachers organize their curriculum under different topics—health, community life, and culture, for example—that are of general relevance to the adult learners in that area. The topics and curriculum content can then be adapted to each group of learners.3

The process for developing, adapting, using, and revising a curriculum framework for adult literacy might include the following steps:

- In national or sub-national workshops, curriculum specialists and experienced teachers develop a curriculum framework for adult literacy classes built around general topics of national or regional interest (improving family and community life, income-generation, health, etc.) that can be modified to meet the educational goals of the individual groups of learners.

- In dialogue with the prospective learners, teacher-trainees in local communities identify the learners' educational goals and the specific topics that are interesting to them.

- At pre-service training workshops, teacher-trainees become familiar with the purpose, content, and instructional method associated with the curriculum framework and then modify the framework to their learner-identified topics.

- Trainees practice teaching the lessons they have prepared to other participants. This practice teaching helps them become familiar with the curriculum and enables them to identify and correct problems with their instructional methods.

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3 An example of this kind of curriculum framework is in UNESCO (1988) *Asia-Pacific Program of Education for All" Training Material for Literacy Personnel. Volume 1.* Paris: UNESCO
In the learners' communities, the curriculum is tested in pilot classes and revised as necessary.

A literacy program in the Netherlands provides an example of a learner-centered approach to curriculum and instruction. Tutors in this program had no single teachers' guide to follow but instead worked together with the adult learners to plan learning activities that were linked directly to their abilities and everyday experiences. Activities based on a health theme, for example, involved learning to write letters to an insurance company or writing a story about a hospital experience. A literacy program for women in South Africa used this same approach: classroom activities were based on issues and experiences from the women's everyday lives and they were encouraged to take leadership in the classroom while teachers took the role of facilitators.

In both of these cases the content of the curriculum and the learning activities were geared specifically to helping the learners' achieve their personal goals for literacy and increase their confidence in their own abilities. Another advantage of this approach is that the learners can immediately apply what they learn to their everyday lives. A disadvantage is that, because class periods are not highly structured, teachers must be skilled in facilitating discussion among the learners. Teachers who lack these abilities may revert to a lecture-type instructional method that leaves little room for dialogue and reaffirms the idea that knowledge belongs solely to the teacher who is responsible for passing it to the students. This emphasizes again the importance of pre-service and in-service training that carefully models the "teacher-as-facilitator" instructional method and provides plenty of opportunities for trainees to practice their facilitator role.

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