# Adult Learners' Understandings and Expectations of Literacy and Their Impact on Participation in Adult Literacy Programs

by

**Randall Alphaeus Pinder** 

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (English and Education) in The University of Michigan 2011

**Doctoral Committee:** 

Associate Professor Anne Leslie Curzan, Chair Professor Anne Ruggles Gere Professor Lesley Anne Rex Associate Professor Megan L. Sweeney © Randall Alphaeus Pinder 2011

# Dedication

To my parents, Earl and Linda, who nurtured my love of literacy and learning,

AND

my spouse, Paul,

whose unwavering support has made this journey a great adventure.

## Acknowledgments

The journey to this moment has been long, and I have not survived and thrived without the support, guidance, and nurturing of many people that I give my thanks to here.

To my dissertation chair and my inspirational mentor, Anne Curzan, who taught me that I should pursue the things I love, and then persuade others that they are worth attention.

To my dissertation committee, Anne Ruggles Gere, Lesley Rex, and Meg Sweeney, who have provided generous guidance to both my process and product.

To my friends in the Joint Program in English and Education whose presence and encouragement have been a constant source of joy and strength.

To Laura, Hannah, Brett, Beth, and Melinda, my cohort, who have their thumbprint on my project, both in the direct contributions to my dissertation and the soulrestoring company and friendship they supply daily.

To my friends who have been patient in listening to me try to explain something that I had not yet figured out.

To the many participants in my research, the learners and sponsors, who made time to talk with me. In particular, I offer thanks to Trisha who worked with me for a year in tutoring sessions, patiently enduring my agenda as she pursued her literacy learning.

To the College of The Bahamas that provided the opportunity for my study leave and a place to return to upon graduation.

To my parents who put me on a path to academic study early, sacrificing so that I might have the tools to make a contribution to the lives of others.

Finally, to Paul, my partner, spouse, friend, and supporter, who has spent the last five years earning his undocumented PhD. In the times of uncertainty and confusion, as well as in the moments of clarity and drive, you kept me focused.

iii

# **Table of Contents**

Dedication	ii
Acknowledgments	iii
List of Tables	viii
List of Appendices	ix
Abstract	X
Introduction	1
Learning about Adult Literacy	1
My Philosophies and Orientations	4
Problem, Hypothesis, and Research Questions	6
A New Angle to a Familiar Story	9
Chapter Summaries	10
Chapter 1 The "Problem" of Adult Literacy in the United States	12
Introduction	12
The Role of Sponsors	12
The Problem Model	14
A Historical Overview of Adult Literacy Work in the United States	18
Participation	
A Closer Look at Participation	41
Conclusion	50
Chapter 2 Defining Adult Literacy	51
Introduction	51
Origin of the Term <i>Literacy</i>	52
Meaning Making	55
The Power of Definitions	56
Sponsors in Control: Assessing Adult Literacy	60

	Learners in Control	65
	Defining Literacy on Behalf of Adults	69
	What Adult Learners Have to Say	72
	Conclusion	82
Cha	apter 3 Methodology	83
	Introduction	83
	Evolution of Study Design	84
	The Role of Ethnography	85
	Summary of Study Design	86
	Sample and Focus	87
	ABE and GED Programs	88
	Validity	90
	Ethics	91
	Selected Research Sites	93
	County Literacy	93
	Recruiting County Literacy Learners	94
	Tutor-Learner Ethnographic Case Study	98
	Recruiting County Literacy Sponsors	99
	Regional Community College	101
	Recruiting Regional Community College Learners	102
	Recruiting Regional Community College Sponsors	104
	A Word about Race	105
	Data Collection	108
	Interviews	108
	Follow-Up Interviews	113
	Sponsor-Generated Artifacts	118
	Member Checking	119
	Data Analysis	121
	Expectations	122
	Understandings	125
	Conclusion	128

Chapter 4 Learner Descriptions	
Introduction	
County Literacy Learners	
Regional Community College Learners	137
Conclusion	143
Chapter 5 Learner Literacy Investment	144
Introduction	144
Conceptual Metaphors	146
Capital: Human, Cultural, and Social	148
Sponsorship and Learner Literacy Investment	153
What Leads Learners to Invest	155
Initial Investment: Motivation	157
Initial Investment: Entry	
Getting in the Door: Rachel's Story	176
Continuing Literacy Investment: Should I Stay?	179
Reconsidering Literacy Investment: Should I Go?	
Conclusion	
Chapter 6 Literacy Meta-Discourse	
Introduction	191
Literacy Meta-Discourse	
Talking about Literacy	
The Literacy Meta-Discourse of Sponsors	
Learners and Literacy Meta-Discourse	
What Sponsors Say about Learners	
Avoidance	
Tentative Engagement	210
Selective Engagement	213
Complex Engagement	
Daron's Literacy Meta-Discourse	
Mutual Influences on Literacy Meta-Discourse	
Conclusion	233

Chapter 7 Implications and Directions for Future Research	234
Introduction	234
A New Perspective on an Old Metaphor: What Could that Mean?	235
Reconsidering Triggering Events	238
The Affordances and Limitations of Social Capital	240
Dialogue and Literacy Meta-Discourse	241
A New Relationship	246
Challenges in the Research Process	247
Future Research	251
Appendices	254
Bibliography	

# List of Tables

Table 2.1: What Does It Mean to Be a 'Literate Person' in America?	64
Table 3.1: Adult Learner Profiles at County Literacy	97
Table 3.2: Sponsor Profiles for County Literacy	100
Table 3.3: Adult Learner Profiles at Regional Community College	103
Table 3.4: Sponsor Profiles for Regional Community College	105
Table 3.5: Sponsors at County Literacy: Interview Schedule	110
Table 3.6: Sponsors at Regional Community College: Interview Schedule	110
Table 3.7: Adult Learners at County Literacy: Initial Interviews	111
Table 3.8: Adult Learners at Regional Community College: Initial Interviews	112
Table 3.9: Adult Learners at County Literacy: Follow-up Interviews	113
Table 3.10: Adult Learners at Regional Community College: Follow-up Interviews	114
Table 3.11: Adult Learner Case Study: Trisha's Interviews	116
Table 3.12: Adult Learner Case Study: Trisha's Tutoring Sessions	117
Table 3.13: Chart of Artifacts	118
Table 3.14: Re-oriented Questions on Learner and Sponsor Expectations	123
Table 3.15: Regional Learners on Success (Bruce)	124
Table 3.16: Re-oriented Questions on Learner and Sponsor Understandings	126
Table 3.17: County Literacy: What Does Literacy Mean to You?	127
Table 3.18: County Learners on Reading and Writing	128

# List of Appendices

Appendix A: Sample Transcription (Page 1)	.254
Appendix B: Consent Form for Adult Learners	
Appendix C: County Literacy Monthly Update Form	.259
Appendix D: Interview Questions for Learners	.261
Appendix E: Interview Questions for Instructors/Tutors	.262
Appendix F: Interview Questions for Staff Members	.263
Appendix G: Interview Questions for Administrators	.264
Appendix H: My Favorite Things and Dreams by Trisha	

## Abstract

Millions of adults participate in adult literacy programs in the United States each year, but approximately half will leave programs before officially completing the requirements or meeting the expectations of sponsors (Brod, 1995; Lewis, 1997; Limage, 1990; Pugsley, 1987). Researchers have cited external complications, such as class schedule conflicts, work-related demands, and family commitments, as the primary source of this phenomenon (Darkenwald, 1986; Kerka, 1995; Quigley, 1998; Wrigley, 1993). Interventions have included creating flexible hours in programs, having employers support programming on site, and incorporating more family members into the work. Yet with all of this constructive effort, adult learners still leave in large numbers.

This dissertation project foregrounds the under-represented complexity of adult learners' lives and explores how learners' understandings and expectations of literacy might affect their decision-making about participation in adult literacy programs. Previous studies have typically focused on the sponsors' perspective, examining the issues of *attrition* and *retention*. Through ethnographic and qualitative methods, this study illuminates the perspectives of 19 adult learners in two adult literacy programs (one ABE, the other GED), highlighting their goals and motivations for program participation. It also considers the understandings of instructors, staff, and administrators and how these relate to those of the adult learners.

This study offers an important new perspective on adult learners' participation, one not based on sponsors' models of *problems*. As analysis of the interviews demonstrates, what learners have to say about their participation in adult literacy programs is vital information for revising the perspectives and work of adult literacy. Privileging learners' perspectives and understandings of literacy disrupts the common investment metaphor about literacy education. This study argues that we should consider how learners invest in sponsors in pursuit of literacy, informed by a complex network of forces and using their available resources, including social capital. The interviews also reveal how learners engage in meta-discourse about literacy, and how their literacy metadiscourse informs the ways they think about participation. This study suggests the need for more qualitative work with adult learners to challenge the current thinking that positions them as passive recipients of learning rather than active participants.

### Introduction

# Learning about Adult Literacy

I arrived at the University of Michigan firmly convinced that my focus of study would be first-year college writing and writers, but I had my attention and passion reoriented in my Literacy as Cultural Practice seminar when I read two shocking items about adult literacy programs. First, research shows that many adult participants do not stay with programs long enough to make significant gains (Merrifield, 1998). The usual statistic is that over half of the adults who start a course or a program will leave before achieving the goals they have set for themselves or the goals of the program. Second, investigations and research relating to adult literacy participation are far from conclusive. For example, in the National Data Update, Annual Conference, State Directors of Adult *Education*, Pugsley (1987) reveals there is much more to learn about participation.<sup>1</sup> The massive study surveyed over 400,000 adult participants in various adult literacy programs about why they left before official completion, and over half of the adult respondents selected the undefined category of 'other' instead of choosing one of the response options provided, such as family, health, daycare, and transportation. These two startling percentages indicate that there are significant issues relating to participation that have not yet been fully explored.

In the United States, the government has instituted compulsory schooling for children until the age of 18 years, expecting that children will learn to read and write, with the premise that literacy will lead to productive employment and responsible citizenship. In reality, many adults, for a variety of reasons, find it difficult or impossible to use school-based literacy practices in their daily lives because they do not possess them or because they have greater facility with alternate literacies. Some adult immigrants arrive in the country without having learned to read and write in their original countries, or they have proficiency in their native language but not in English. In the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> More recent *National Data Updates* like this one are not available.

United States, children with learning disabilities may attend schools and graduate with diplomas but leave without a command of independent reading and writing activities, and so they become adults who may develop sophisticated practices (such as group literacies) that enable them to function well in many (but not all) circumstances. Some adolescents find school to be a lower priority than basic survival or family responsibility, or they find circumstances in life outside of school more compelling, dropping out or checking out without facility in the reading and writing practices valued by employers and the government. Adults from many different origins often find themselves sharing a common marginalized position that places pressure on them to find ways to thrive or simply survive in an American society that privileges literacies that they do not practice.

The United States federal government, state governments, and independent institutions and organizations have recognized the struggles of adults who have been called *illiterate*, and these sponsors have actively sought to provide educational programming to assist them. This adult literacy education began in earnest in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and has continued to the present, with the support of budgets, legislation, research, professional educators, and volunteers. However, these efforts made for adult literacy education through Adult Basic Education (ABE), Adult Secondary Education (ASE), GED (General Educational Development) certification, and other programs often have been deemed failures. Research and political rhetoric suggest that large numbers of adults in need of literacy education are not being reached (Laubach Literacy Action, 2001); that those who do attend do not stay long and make limited gains (Merrifield, 1998); that those who do attend are probably not those most in need of help (Hunter & Harman, 1979); that assessments are biased, limited, and unhelpful (Roberts, 1995); that instruction is insufficient and instructors are insufficiently trained to make real progress (Sticht, 1988-1989); that many other serious issues such as poverty, social inequalities, and racism complicate and thwart literacy education (ProLiteracy 2003); and that there is not enough research to prove much other than we need more and better research (Pugsley, 1987).

Research relating to participation in adult literacy programs often concentrates on quantitative data. Many studies focus on input-output information, such as completion rates, GED certifications, and attendance, which cannot capture the complex motivations

and behaviors of adults who participate and their interactions with sponsors (Beder, 1999). The summarized 50% attrition rate also does not suggest the power dynamics constantly negotiated as learners continue to participate in spite of forces that make participation difficult or as sponsors seek to persuade learners to persist and adopt the goals and missions of various programs (Merrifield, 1998). Numbers do not tell the stories of adult learners who track success based on longer timelines than a 10- or 14-week semester. The only way to learn more about the information that is summarized in these quantitative data is to go to the adults and invite them to speak about their experiences in literacy programs.

Collecting information from adults is more complicated than the previous statement suggests. Learners have been asked their reasons for leaving and for staying, and they have provided researchers with some useful information that might support changes in adult literacy education and the ways it is delivered. Causes (as well as blame) have been offered for many years since the seminal review of adult literacy studies by Hunter and Harman (1979), and many studies continue to explore external forces as the causes of attrition: scheduling of classes, job demands, childcare, family obligations, and so forth (Darkenwald, 1986; Kerka, 1995; Quigley, 1998; Wrigley, 1993). Many sponsors—politicians, educators, and researchers—continue to push the idea that external forces, those events and situations that are connected with the learner but not within the learner, are the greatest contributing factors to attrition, and so they dedicate time, energy, and funds to addressing them (Quigley, 1998). Sponsors sometimes assume that only external forces influence motivation and participation, rather than acknowledging that adult learners arrive with understandings of literacy and expectations of the programs.

This exploratory, qualitative study is an attempt to probe deeper than the more usual input-output research that provides adult learners with lists of expected responses and instead uses Pugsley's category of 'other' as the focus of investigation. The problem of leaving cannot be effectively addressed without more substantial communication from adult learners who can discuss the decision-making processes behind their actions. As researchers, we cannot ignore the materiality of the situation, neither can we simply work on the external issues and ignore the internal ones. For example, waiving a registration

fee might address one need, but if adults have other powerful forces at work in their lives, often unexpressed, then resolving a lesser concern will not prevent them from leaving when these forces exert their influence. We also cannot assume that an adult who signs up for a course shares the concept of literacy endorsed by the course, neither can we assume that the adult will convert to and operate with the sponsor's understanding or the instructor's interpretation of the sponsor's definition. Adult learners are often unable to articulate their understandings in ways that sponsors or researchers can hear because they use different vocabularies. Merely using familiar literacy vocabulary will not ensure that the same meanings—denotative and connotative—are shared. The complex issues surrounding participation cannot be hastily identified and easily addressed.

The history of the term *literacy* and the rich discussion around the term confirms the complexity of the problem. The word continues to develop (for example, *literacy* to *literacies*), and the varieties of meanings are laden with political ideologies and agendas. Additional review of the literature in the field of adult literacy studies shows the ways that problem-solution models have dominated government research and investigation with a positivist emphasis (Bingman, Ebert, & Bell, 2000). The idea has been that adult literacy and illiteracy can be identified and addressed with the right program, with emphasis on what the sponsors can do to make programs successful (Sticht, 2000). Those in charge of supporting and developing adult literacy programs have usually considered adult learners as passive objects or even culpable subjects that need to be corrected in order for illiteracy to be eliminated. This project resists passing judgment on learners and seeks to understand literacy and learners' pursuit of it through their eyes.

# **My Philosophies and Orientations**

This study intentionally privileges the words and lives of adult learners within programs in order to provide them more visibility and greater representation in the conversations concerning their literacy, which are primarily in the hands of sponsors. It is my contention that the majority of research relating to adult literacy has overlooked, ignored, relegated, downplayed, or dismissed the direct contributions of adult participants in developing and improving literacy initiatives. Historically, sponsors have controlled the definitions of literacy, the construction of mission and vision statements, and the articulation of successful outcomes for programs. This project centers on the perspectives of adult learners, using methods and approaches that require personal interaction with them through interviews and an ethnographic case study. In doing so, I make learners' understandings and expectations a significant part of the conversation about adult literacy programming. This research also makes the case that improving the work of adult literacy involves changing learner behavior as well as sponsors' images of and behavior toward learners, so that sponsors think differently about their own understandings and expectations of literacy and learners.

This research is informed, but not dominated, by critical theories of education. According to Bredo (2006), critical theory emphasizes "the way knowledge may be biased, self-serving, or socially repressive" (p. 22). I recognize the role that those in power have had in affecting the lives of those with less power, but I resist the urge to condemn or demonize all authorities. I believe that many adult learners in a variety of adult literacy programs in the United States feel powerless in their own educational process. My research considers how those in charge of literacy, the sponsors, have been able to produce and control knowledge relating to literacy, perhaps with the most noble of intentions, while expecting adult literacy learners to accept the labels and diagnoses made on their behalf.

For example, The National Literacy Act of 1991 established the National Institute for Literacy to "enhance the national effort to eliminate the problem of illiteracy by the year 2000 by improving research, development and information dissemination through a national research center" (*NIFL Report on Activities and Accomplishments*, p. 52). In framing the issue as a "national effort to eliminate the problem of illiteracy" rather than a national effort to *promote literacy development*, the sponsors represent illiteracy as something negative, perhaps like a cancer or a disease that is not to be endured or tolerated, but destroyed or removed. Adults who, according to the sponsors, are *illiterate* become conflated with the problem. They are a problem that needs to be solved, and they are encouraged to join literacy programs to correct their deficiencies.

These adult learners, often minorities and immigrants from lower socio-economic positions, are disadvantaged. Scribner (1984) writes, "it is an undisputed fact that illiteracy in America is concentrated among the poor and ethnic minorities whose

problems of poverty and political powerlessness are deeply intertwined with problems of access to knowledge and literacy" (p. 12). The ones who define literacy, typically the literate sponsors, are able to say who can and cannot be labeled as literate, so that literacy serves a gatekeeping function. They do not do so maliciously or perhaps even consciously, but the choices they make relating to assessment and definitions of what counts as literacy disadvantage those who do not have the power over policy. Van Dijk (1993) argues that it is the marginalized and the disadvantaged who need to be defended since there is no neutral stance. He writes, "Critical scholars should not worry about the interests or perspectives of those in power, who are best placed to take care of their own interests anyway" (p. 253). Adult learners, therefore, are the focus of this study as they are the ones who lack political power in the current literacy system.

This study does not seek to make sweeping generalizations about what adults understand about literacy and expect from literacy programs in order to create easy solutions to problematic participation. Rather my research approach and orientation are pragmatic. They are based on the assumption that a variety of perspectives is needed, not to pick the one best approach that will suit all adult learners, but to establish the differences in and see the possibilities for tailoring instruction for each learner. In describing the pragmatic philosophy of educational research, Bredo (2006) points out that a pragmatic approach takes note of each situation and sees it as a particular set of circumstances rather than an enactment of general laws. This entails "a give and take between general and particular, each informing the other. But the real test of inquiry is not just its resolution of current uncertainty but whether its results hold up when acted on in the future" (p. 25). I adopt a pragmatic orientation with this research as the most likely way toward positive change.

#### **Problem, Hypothesis, and Research Questions**

In its earlier iterations, this study connected the problem of learners' leaving with definitions of literacy held by sponsors and learners. I contemplated how conflict or alignment in meanings might relate to participation. If adult learners were leaving in large numbers, I reasoned, perhaps the ways they understand literacy were incompatible with sponsors' definitions. This disconnection would become apparent for adult learners at

different times, leading them to leave after a day, a week, or a month. My reasoning also suggested that I needed to know not only what understandings learners had, but what they expected to happen based on their understandings. Their motivation for leaving (and staying) suggested a combination of understandings and expectation of literacy.

My contemplations generated the hypothesis that the ways that learners understand literacy and the expectations they have of literacy influence their participation in adult literacy programs. What adult learners believe they are getting and what they hope for affect their behaviors. The two-part central research question for this study is as follows: *What are the understandings and expectations of literacy held by adult participants in adult literacy education programs, and how might their understandings and expectations influence their decisions regarding participation within programs*? I have gathered information from adult learners concerning their understandings of literacy, their motivations for participation, and their expectations and goals relating to literacy. I have also examined the understandings, motivations, expectations, and goals of sponsors, gathered from interviews with instructors, staff members, and administrators, an ethnographic case study with an adult learner, and sponsor-generated artifacts (e.g. flyers, websites, brochures, mission statements, etc).

This is not a comparative study; that is, it is not designed to offer a balanced examination of the expectations and understandings of learners and sponsors. Learners remain at the center, and sponsors are involved because of the additional information they can supply concerning learners. Their observations and impressions of learners' understandings and expectations are useful for triangulating data collected from learner interviews and the ethnographic case study.

I divided my central research question into a number of additional questions for investigation. Gathering information from adult learners, instructors, staff, administrators, and sponsor-generated materials allowed me to compare understandings and expectations of literacy and adult literacy programs in order to identify congruence and incongruence among understandings, goals, motivations, and expectations relating to adult participation. There are four orientations of questions:

- 1. Learner Understandings of Literacy
  - What are learner understandings of literacy?

- How are their understandings of literacy articulated?
- What are their connotations of literacy?
- In what ways do they make their understandings known, even without using the term *literacy*?
- What resources and experiences do adults draw upon in developing their understandings of literacy?
- 2. Learner Expectations of Literacy
  - What are learner expectations of literacy?
  - What similarities exist among learners regarding expectations?
  - What resources and experiences do adults draw upon in developing their expectations of literacy?
- 3. Sponsor Observations and Impressions of Learners
  - What understandings and expectations of literacy do sponsors have for themselves and adult learners?
  - What participation behaviors have they observed?
  - What do sponsors report that learners say about their expectations and understandings of literacy?
  - What resources and experiences do sponsors draw upon when contemplating literacy?
  - How do sponsors respond to the understandings, motivations, goals, and expectations of adult learners?
- 4. Learner Participation and Learner Expectations & Understandings
  - How do understandings of literacy, held by adult learners, influence their decisions concerning program enrollment and continued participation?
  - What do learners think of their own participation behaviors?

#### A New Angle to a Familiar Story

A familiar story about adult learners and their path to literacy exists, a one-sided rescue narrative that circulates in the American society. Illiterate adults are struggling people who come from impoverished and difficult backgrounds. They have been denied so many things—education, health, wealth, and happiness—enduring lives of quiet desperation. They are a burden to themselves, and, by extension, a burden to society. Illiteracy is responsible for their poverty, unemployment, dependence, and lack of prospects. They must be made literate, and the best way to do this is for those who are literate and powerful to design programs for them that they must seek out or be cajoled into attending, where, like little children in the first grades of primary school, they will learn to read and write. Their illiteracy and deficient abilities prevent them having any real say in how things are done. If they place their trust in sponsors, then these learners will gain access to literacy and all its promises, just a little later than those who have reaped its benefits for many years.

The version above is deliberately cynical but not so exaggerated that it does not highlight the real struggles and perhaps cruelties evident in the ways learners are represented and treated. Too often, those who lack certain kinds of power have their stories written for them by those who have never lived the experiences of the marginalized. Many have commented on this usurping of agency in storytelling. For example, Carolyn Steedman (1986/ 2008), in her compelling work *Landscape for a Good Woman*, describes the need to tell her story as a woman growing up in a working class home because historians have told a simplified and inaccurate version of her life and her mother's life. She sees a "refusal of a complicated psychology to those living in conditions of material distress" (p. 12). Historians instead assume her story, and the stories of others in her world, glossing over nuance and complexity:

This extraordinary attribution of sameness and the acceptance of sameness to generations of lives arise[s] from several sources. First of all, delineation of emotional and psychological selfhood has been made by and through the testimony of people in a central relationship to the dominant culture, that is to say by and through people who are not working class. This is an obvious point, but it measures out an immensely

complicated and contradictory area of historical development that has scarcely yet been investigated. Superficially, it might be said that historians, failing to find evidence of most people's emotional or psychosexual existence, have simply assumed that there can't be much there to find. (p. 11-12)

Steedman argues that the story of the working class has been hijacked by those who have never lived it. Because historians did not perceive the richness and complexity in working class existence they expected and were looking for, they asserted that the working class lacked such things. History, however, changes when people tell their own stories, when they offer a fresh perspective on familiar details.

This study is a fresh perspective on the dominant ideas that adult learners are driven by singular, pragmatic motivations to pursue literacy learning and that they do so with a limited or complete lack of understanding of what literacy means. Adult learners have been represented by sponsors in narratives limited by a lack of familiarity with learners' lives and with a myopic focus on the needs of the sponsor. When one sits and talks with adult learners, however, their rich and complex psychologies with decisionmaking emerge along with their reflective, analytic consideration of the meaning of literacy in their lives and the world, forcing all who are willing to reconsider and question the familiar, flawed representations in circulation.

In the chapters that follow, I offer a retelling of adult learners' participation in adult literacy programs. Using learners' words, I describe their learner literacy investment, the ways in which they engage sponsors in pursuit of literacy learning with complex motivations and savvy use of their resources. I also show what learners think about literacy, and how their literacy meta-discourse relates to the ways they participate. What learners have to say about their expectations and understandings of literacy is vital information for revising the work of adult literacy.

## **Chapter Summaries**

*Chapter 1: The "Problem" of Adult Literacy Education in the United States* offers a brief history of the work in adult literacy education in the United States, which began in

earnest in the 1960s. This history is dominated by a problem model that has affected the ways that sponsors conceptualize and evaluate participation.

*Chapter 2: Defining Adult Literacy* explores sponsor control over the term *literacy* and the ways sponsor understandings have affected adult literacy programming. I also examine the ways that learners understand literacy and some of the research that has given attention to their perspectives.

*Chapter 3: Methodology* provides an overview of the research project and the research methodology within two adult literacy programs: County Literacy's one-on-one tutoring program with adult basic learners and the GED program in the Adult Adjustments department at Regional Community College. This chapter describes the rationale for the project, site selection, the study design, the participant populations, and the data collection and analysis procedures.

*Chapter 4: Learner Descriptions* is an alphabetized collection of short descriptions of each learner participant. In each account, I describe the learner's background, literacy experiences, and future plans. This chapter is designed to provide readers with greater insight into the lives of the adult learners and prepare readers for the findings within the following chapters.

*Chapter 5: Learner Literacy Investment* presents the first of two major findings relating to adult learner participation. This chapter looks closely at learners' expectations and their complex decision-making processes which challenge sponsor-oriented economic metaphors that deny learners agency. I also examine the ways in which learners use capital, specifically their social capital, to access programs and improve their literate capital.

*Chapter 6: Literacy Meta-Discourse* discusses the second major finding relating to learners' understandings of literacy. While sponsors doubt learners' desire and ability to dialogue about literacy, learners demonstrate and accumulate literacy meta-discourse, another form of capital.

*Chapter 7: Implications and Directions for Future Research* examines the implications for learners and sponsors of this research before suggesting directions for future research. I consider a new relationship between learners and sponsors and discuss the difficulties and limitations of this research process.

# **Chapter 1**

# The "Problem" of Adult Literacy in the United States

# Introduction

This chapter focuses on the ways that sponsors have framed adult literacy as a "problem" for the society and the individual. In particular, the federal government has controlled the conversation about literacy, often speaking exclusively of the threat and danger of illiteracy, and this perspective has had direct consequences on the ways that adult literacy education has been designed and implemented in the United States. I provide a brief history of the work of sponsors in adult literacy education to show how sponsors have been both proactive and reactive in addressing the perceived literacy needs of the country, without relying on adult learners to have a substantial say in the ways that sponsors represent learners and literacy. I then discuss the issue of participation, a secondary problem for sponsors. The federal government and other literacy sponsors have used their own understandings of adult literacy to construct a crisis of illiteracy that only they have the power to address. They have relied on a business model, one that suggests that investing in adult literacy will yield great profits and dividends for sponsors, such as full employment and good citizenship. It is a metaphor that contributes to a story/history in which adult learners are positioned as something other than thoughtful, active agents in their pursuit of literacy.

#### The Role of Sponsors

Multiple groups and individuals in the United States have claimed a say in how literacy has been defined. In *Literacy in American Lives*, Deborah Brandt (2001) discusses the roles that so many have played in attempting to gain authority over literacy, examining the wider historical context of literacy in the United States between 1895 and 1995, as well as the significance of literacy sponsorship in the lives of eighty individuals,

sometimes across generations. Her theorizing and examination of literacy sponsors in a variety of cultural and generational contexts helps to frame much of this study. According to Brandt, in the processes of learning, people are enabled or sponsored in systems that are primarily designed to promote economic development. She defines *sponsors* as "any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way" (p. 19). These sponsors exercise control over literacy; they "set the terms for access to literacy and wield powerful incentives for compliance and loyalty" (p. 19). What is essential in her description is that sponsors expect compensation, and she sees "a reciprocal relationship with those they underwrite" (p. 19). Sponsors include governments, private corporations, and international organizations as well as teachers, relatives, and religious leaders, who all expect something in return for their investment. For example, an employer who sponsors a workplace literacy program might expect greater productivity from the workers involved, or a government that invests in a family literacy program might seek bragging rights for high literacy rates.

This system of sponsorship locates the agency clearly with the sponsor who is able to offer (or withhold) access to the skills and instruction desired by learners. In the case of adult literacy education, the government and agencies that provide the budgets get to define literacy, and often they expect adult learners to adopt their definitions. To use the resources, the adult learners might surrender their own understandings of literacy and the expectations and goals that relate to their meanings. For example, they could be channeled into tracks toward a GED certification when they are not seeking validation through official documentation; however, if that is the program sponsored, adults may have no choice but to comply. Or a program might expect the adoption of a standardized dialect even if the adults feel no need to change their spoken language. When only sponsors' needs are taken into account, learners may find themselves participating halfheartedly in programs that do not reflect their understandings and expectations of literacy.

# **The Problem Model**

In order to persuade Americans of the perceived literacy needs of the country, the federal government and other literacy sponsors have relied on language with negative connotations to make their case for action. Instead of addressing the potential of literacy in developing the nation, they have consistently chosen to address the problem of illiteracy and its deleterious influence on morality, security, citizenship, and the economy. The consequence is that even the term *literacy*, which should be a positive or neutral term, conjures up images of hardship, struggle, suffering, poverty, ignorance, and dearth. A further consequence is that any adult who is tagged with the label *illiterate* becomes a part of the problem.

The problem model operates in two distinct ways. First, literacy is sometimes imagined as a solution to some social ill, such as poverty or unemployment. Stubblefield and Keane (1994) comment that, historically, adult education has often been linked with crises:

In the 1950s, the adult education community and segments of the philanthropic community sought to shape the field of adult education, establish it as an educational domain, and give it direction. In the 1960s, the federal government used adult education in the service of distributive social justice to address a crisis in race and class through the War on Poverty. In the 1970s, the education and philanthropic communities sought to gain recognition of lifelong learning as a master concept for planning and organizing services in support of adult learning. A transition to the postindustrial society made continuing learning an imperative and opened new discussion about bringing more domains of adult learning under the purview of adult education. In the 1980s, the workforce crisis became the catalyst for educational action. (p. 308)

Stubblefield and Keane do not suggest that the learning needs of adults were the immediate crisis for each decade, but that they were linked with crises such as poverty, racism, social inequality, and unemployment. Literacy offered through adult education is seen as part of the solution if not the cure. Such a problem model only imagines literacy in service to some greater good. Increased or improved literate practices become a

panacea for all the nation's ills. Literacy, however, cannot be the fix for every struggle or inequity. Suggesting that it can puts tremendous and unfair pressure (potentially blame) on adults who do not aspire to or find it difficult to aspire to such literacies. They become part of a national problem.

Second, Sticht (1988-1989) suggests that illiteracy is often constructed as a crisis itself, leading to a cycle of crisis that tends to drive efforts relating to adult literacy. He states,

Generally, this concern leads to some sort of transient activity: a national commission is established or an initiative is begun; journalists write about the problem of adult illiteracy; researchers gather a little data; volunteer classes proliferate; and then, in a few years, everything settles down again until the next crisis. (p. 62)

Sticht cynically critiques the way sponsors respond to literacy needs and suggests that this crisis mentality leads to hasty and poorly thought out action, such as accepting improperly trained instructors to fill instructional positions. Increasing budgets, improving advertising, and training instructors are all valuable and useful efforts, but they may fail if sponsors proceed rashly, driven by panic to accept quick reform.

The crisis mentality is linked to many doom-and-gloom metaphors that sponsors use to argue for change. Hyperbolic language has dominated conversations about literacy, and adult literacy learners have been conflated with the negative representations. For example, in 1977 *The New York Times* used the headline "Illiteracy of Adults Called U.S. Disease" (Hunter and Harman, 1979), and in 1996, Robert W. Sweet, Jr., President and co-founder of The National Right to Read Foundation, published "Illiteracy: An Incurable Disease or Education Malpractice?"<sup>2</sup> Such comparisons not only associate illiteracy with disease, but by implication, they turn adult literacy learners into sick individuals, making them seem helpless and in need of intervention from professionals.

Disease is not the only metaphor that sponsors rely upon to represent literacy/illiteracy as a crisis and represent adult learners as problematic. In an informal survey, Sticht (1999) provided eight metaphors to 81 adult literacy educators and asked them to rank the metaphors according to which was most appropriate for describing adult

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> http://www.nrrf.org/essay\_Illiteracy.html

literacy work. While a few metaphors suggest a nurturing relationship, all of the metaphors clearly show significant imbalance within the power structures, and several frame illiteracy or the illiterate adult as severely problematic. The figures indicate the percentages of adult educators who rated the metaphor as either somewhat or very appropriate for adult literacy education. The metaphors are listed according to their rank from most to least appropriate:

- The Psychotherapy Metaphor. Analogy: The Psychotherapist is to the Depressed Client as the Adult Literacy Educator is to the Low Self Esteem Adult Learner. 80%
- The Business Metaphor. Analogy: The Merchant is to the Customer as the Adult Literacy Educator is to the Student. 70%
- The Economic Metaphor. Analogy: The Business Person is to the Investment in Machinery/Facilities as the Public (including the adult students/learners) is to the Investment in Adult Literacy Educators, Facilities, Study Time, etc. to Increase the Productivity of Adult Students/Learners. 69% (tie with #4)
- The Public Schools Metaphor. Analogy: The Public Schools are to Children as Adult Literacy Providers are to Adults. 69%
- The Revolutionary Metaphor. Analogy: The Revolutionary Leader (Liberator) is to the Oppressed as the Adult Literacy Educator is to the Learners. 58%
- The Medical Metaphor: Analogy: The Doctor is to the Patient as the Adult Literacy Educator is to the Student. 56%
- The Military Metaphor. Analogies: (1) The soldier "stamps out" aggression as the adult literacy educator "stamps out" illiteracy. (2) The soldier is to the enemy as the adult literacy educator is to the illiterate. 28%
- The Parent Metaphor. Analogy: The Parent is to the Child as the Adult Literacy Educator is to the Adult Student. 26%<sup>3</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> http://wiki.literacytent.org/index.php/Scientific-basedEdResearchPart2

Several of these analogies conflate illiteracy and adult learners with undesirable (even deadly) situations and people. The medical metaphor can suggest that learners are sick or diseased people with illiteracy as their affliction, the military metaphor makes the learner the enemy, and the revolutionary metaphor makes illiteracy an oppressive force. While the most popular therapy metaphor lacks the aggression and potential violence of the less popular figures of speech, it still frames literacy/illiteracy as an issue of function/dysfunction and links literacy with problems.

Like practitioners, many researchers have also adopted the problem/crisis model in order to persuade authorities of the need to address literacy/illiteracy. Some researchers use heightened emotional rhetoric to drive the cause of adult literacy reform, hoping to motivate change for adults, but too often researchers represent them as helpless victims in the accounts they write. In *Illiterate America*, Kozol (1985), one of the better known fervent critics of adult literacy education, opens with the chapter "Invisible Minority: The Growing Crisis of Illiterate America." He writes, "Twenty-five million American adults cannot read the poison warnings on a can of pesticide, a letter from their children's teacher, or the front page of a daily paper. An additional 35 million read only at a level which is less than equal to the full survival needs of society" (p. 4). Illiteracy, couched in these scenarios, is not only limiting, but it is potentially deadly for millions, and he leads with the direst example. By framing literacy/illiteracy using such life and death imagery, he perhaps aims to provide persuasive evidence that can lead to action and intervention. Doing so, however, makes adults in these situations appear ignorant and helpless, barely able to make it through a day.

While other researchers have more moderate descriptions, using the problem model in order to conceptualize adult literacy education creates unflattering and unfair negative representations of adult learners. Newman and Beverstock (1990), after reviewing the origin and development of the crisis model, conclude that "illiteracy is not a crisis but a challenge" and a "problem to be solved" (p. 202). Yet, even while trying to provide a more optimistic picture, they construct an emancipatory and revolutionary image, writing that "once we abolished the slavery of chains; now we need to abolish the servitude of illiteracy" (p. 203). Imagining adults as slaves disempowers them and robs them of the very agency that so many sponsors claim to be supporting.

What seems to get lost in this problem and crisis framing is that the adult learners are attached to labels of literacy/illiteracy. Even if learners are not called a problem directly, they are positioned as part of the problem. Indeed, they are not characterized as the problem-solvers; instead, sponsors with their policies and programs mobilize to solve the problem. Adult literacy learners have not created the political rhetoric around adult literacy education, neither have they had power or opportunity to shape policy, but they are necessary participants in various campaigns and initiatives aimed at changing adults in some way in order to improve their individual lives as well as the wider community. This is an enormous burden for learners, to have no part in constructing the crisis, while receiving the blame for failure to transform their lives and their communities.

## A Historical Overview of Adult Literacy Work in the United States

I need to make a few distinctions concerning the ways this study uses terminology relating to adult literacy programs. Adult basic education. ABE. Adult literacy education. Basic skills education. Basic education. These are all terms that more or less address the same kind of educational work, and the literature uses all of the terms to describe educational efforts that aim to improve the reading, writing, and mathematical skills of adult learners to levels expected of graduated high school students. Adult education is a much broader term, often encompassing both pre-college and college level education, provided the participants are 18 years or older. Workplace education/training includes adults and literacy instruction, but it is specifically connected with employment situations, with an emphasis on improving skills for increased productivity. Finally, English as a Second Language (ESL) programs in the United States address the literacy needs of those for whom English is not their first language. These distinctions, however, have complications. For example, Denny (1992) reports that in New York City "approximately 40% of basic education students are immigrants," including ESL learners, suggesting an overlap of participants (p. 338). For this project, I use the term adult literacy education to designate programs, such as ABE and GED programs, with an educational focus on adults (18 years or older) that target basic literacies in reading and writing (and other practices), which sponsors designate as essential for functioning within society.

The marginalization of adult literacy learners and the use of the problem model are not new but have been a part of the educational landscape since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is important to note, however, that controversy and crisis were associated with adults learning to read and write in previous centuries. For example, literacy work with Native Americans in the 1700s and early 1800s focused on teaching Native Americans how to read and write English in an effort to acculturate them into the religion and way of life of the ruling white population. Gordon and Gordon (2003) write,

> With few exceptions the literacy missionaries showed little regard for Indian cultures, which they believed were "savage." Literacy was their best tool for initiating the American Indian to the ways of "civilization" before introducing them to Christianity. Literacy became their chief means of acculturation. Indians were expected to repudiate their identities and learn to talk, act, dress, and live like white men and women. These Indian literacy efforts occurred while most whites assumed that such a leap was impossible or even undesirable. (p. 193)

Literacy proponents saw the inability to communicate and dominate the native tribes as a problem, and literacy instruction was carried out by religious and government sponsors to gain better control over the populations. These efforts were not initiated or designed by the Native American populations; rather government and missionary bodies decided that this approach to literacy education was best for the nation.

Later, the problem of literacy was again connected with religious sponsors, but this time the adult learners were African Americans. Janet Cornelius (1991) expertly shows how the situation in the South was complicated with many tensions and paradoxes, even within groups that were thought to be unified in their thinking, following the 1863 Emancipation of African American slaves. Sponsors such as churches, religious groups, slave owners, abolitionists, and politicians disagreed among themselves as to the right to and role of literacy and religion (Christianity) in the lives of free blacks and slaves. The conflict was driven primarily by the shared belief that all people, free and enslaved, should have access to the Christian scriptures in order to have a chance at salvation. How this access was to be provided was the source of much debate and dissent. The African American adults were not equal partners in decision-making, but as Cornelius argues,

"black people themselves were responsible for founding and perpetuating most of their educational efforts in the South" (p. 149). They had to find ways to succeed while sponsors debated the problem.

The problem model of literacy moved into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the government and other institutions attempting to solve the problem they defined. Most adult literacy researchers cite the adult education classes started by Cora Wilson Stewart as the first concentrated effort in Adult Basic Education (ABE), although the term did not exist at that time (Cook, 1977). Stewart was the superintendant of Rowan County, Kentucky public schools, and in 1911, she offered schooling for adults on moonlit nights (Costa, 1988, p. 5). The program was organized by volunteers and reached over 1200 adults. Her work was particularly groundbreaking because she advocated teaching adults using materials from their own lives. They were not to be treated as children, and so she used materials from their functional contexts, such as a weekly newspaper, to teach subjects including language, history, and civics (Sticht, 1988-1989, p. 72). The program was popular and spread to other counties the following year, and eventually to over ten states. Stewart's schools gained momentum with the beginning of WWI when they offered special classes to draftees that would enable them to qualify to join the military. This led to the establishment of a literacy commission, a literacy campaign sponsored by the government, and a textbook for soldiers called The Soldier's First Book (Costa, 1998, p. 6). This book was distributed to over 50,000 World War I soldiers (Newman, 1990, p. 91).

Cora Stewart was also known for being a supporter of the problem model, which helped her gain support by creating a sense of urgency, but her approach ultimately made adults part of the problem. In her book *Moonlight School for the Emancipation of Adult Illiterates*, Stewart (1922) compares adult learners to slaves, struggling to be free from their masters. In *Cora Wilson Stewart: Crusader against Illiteracy*, biographer Willie Nelms (1997) recalls that Stewart chaired the illiteracy section at the World Conference of Education held in San Francisco in 1924. At one meeting, Stewart said, "This is more than a fight for literacy, it is a fight on crime, disease, war and other enemies of mankind which illiteracy brings and the removal of adult literacy is one of the most important problems we have to face" (Nelms, 1997, p. 116). She invoked the problem model and

used it as a rallying cry, associating literacy work with social ills and conflict to heighten the urgency of her mission. She made it her mission, her crusade, to ensure that adults felt ashamed if they were not literate. Stewart (1922) writes that her Moonlight School "has made illiteracy appear as a disgraceful and unpopular thing. There is an odium attached to it to-day that was lacking in the years gone by. Illiteracy has been stigmatized where the crusade against it has been waged and made to seem a thing to flee as from leprosy" (p. 155). She saw success in convincing educators that adults were diseased or afflicted if they were unable to read and write. This sentiment was taken up by other adult education campaigns and, eventually, by the federal government.

Sponsors represented illiteracy as a danger to the individual and the nation, and during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they suggested it was a threat to national development and security. First, immigrants were only allowed to have access to the United States if they were deemed literate. In 1917, the United States Congress passed the Immigration Act (a.k.a. Literacy Act) even though President Woodrow Wilson had vetoed it. The Act included a literacy test and it denied entry to "All aliens over sixteen years of age, physically capable of reading, who can not read the English language, or some other language or dialect, including Hebrew or Yiddish" (Elliot, 2005, p. 70). This led to a significant drop in immigration and changed the racial profile of immigrants in the period up to 1920. This Act linked the right to be an American with the ability to read.

Second, literacy was made a determining factor in acceptance into military service. The army needed soldiers for World War I and screened soldiers based on their performance on intelligence tests. The Selective Service Act of 1917 was established to recruit young men and swell the numbers of the regular army, and these recruits became the subjects for intelligence testing (Elliot, 2005). Yerkes (1921) and his colleagues were testing the IQs of the recruits to ensure that only those of a certain mental ability were taken into active service, but they used testing that required recruits to be literate. Eventually, they created two tests, one for those who could read and write called the alpha test, and a second called the beta test for those with low literacy skills. They experimented with various ways of sorting the subjects, ultimately conflating literacy with intelligence and illiteracy with being unqualified and unsuited for service.

Later, leading up to WWII, the Army decided that it could not function by simply weeding out illiterate and, therefore, unfit soldiers. The military did not want to lose potential recruits due to illiteracy, so the army turned its attention to improving literacy. In the draft for WWI, 25% of draftees were tested and labeled as illiterate (Gordon & Gordon, 2003, p. 273). Just before the start of WWII, all recruited soldiers were required to pass a literacy test. This reduced the number of qualified recruits, and this literacy standard had to be changed to increase numbers for the war in 1941 (Cook, 1977). Paul Witty (1943), following in the footsteps of William Gray (one of those responsible for the Dick and Jane series), changed the work of adult literacy in the army with the publication of the Army Reader in which Private Pete goes through literacy training, just like the soldiers who read about him. The reader used an analytic or meaning-based approach for instruction, focusing on the use of sight words with very little phonics-based instruction. The army's reading program was designed to move soldiers to a 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading ability, and Witty advocated using multiple methods and resources to achieve that goal, including audio-visual technology, picture-based readers, and a personalized newspaper for adult learners (Sticht, 2005, p. 7). These efforts in literacy education, however, were not for the entire nation, but restricted to those in the military.

The military was also responsible for another adult literacy innovation in 1942: the General Educational Development (GED) program. What began as a ready solution to a concern in a specific population developed into a significant program for literacy sponsors in the decades that followed. Men who had been drafted before completing high school to serve in the war returned home without any documentation of their literacy. On its website, the American Council on Education (ACE) states that, in 1942, the "American Council on Education (ACE) was commissioned to measure high school instructional outcomes for military personnel and veterans who had not completed high school."<sup>4</sup> Tyler (2005) summarizes its origin:

The roots of the GED program trace to World War II. In 1942, an advisory committee to the Army Institute, headed by Ralph Tyler, selected five tests from the Iowa Test of Educational Development to form the first

 $http://www.acenet.edu/Content/NavigationMenu/ged/pubs/GED_Testing_Program_Fact_Sheet_v2_2010.p~df$ 

GED tests. The purpose of the exams was to certify that veterans returning from World War II without a conventional high school diploma had the skills to take advantage of the postsecondary education benefits provided in the GI Bill. In essence, the tests certified that these men and women who had left school to serve the country before graduating had acquired skills in the military that were equivalent to the cognitive skills possessed by regular high school graduates. (p. 48)

The GED program was designed for a specific population, members of the military who had not completed high school, and the military needed to assist veterans with their reentry into employment and higher education. In 1947, this focus changed when New York allowed non-veterans who had dropped out of high school to also take the test (Tyler, 2005, p. 48). This was the beginning of a significant transformation for sponsors and learners as they both began to see the GED certification as a viable second chance at education and literacy.

The 1960s became "A Decade of Revolution" (Sticht, 1988-89, p. 88) for adult literacy, because it was the first time the federal government became significantly involved in adult literacy education with the goal of maintaining economic stability.<sup>5</sup> In the previous decade, the crisis was children's literacy, with national attention on *Why Johnny Can't Read—and What You Can Do About It.* Author Rudolf Flesh (1955) argued that children were being taught poorly and treated as little adults, fueling a debate relating to reading instruction in compulsory schools (phonics vs. whole word), not adult literacy. Just a few years later, the crisis was adult literacy and employment.

On May 25, 1961, President John F. Kennedy announced that "Large scale unemployment during a recession is bad enough, but large scale unemployment during a period of prosperity would be intolerable" (Kremen, 1974). In order to ensure that citizens would not be caught off guard by economic changes, Congress established the Manpower Development and Training Act in 1962 which brought together the Department of Labor and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare to address the needs of those who were unemployed as well as those who needed to be retrained in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Earlier involvement had been far more limited. For example, in 1777, the federal government had funded a program to help soldiers in the Continental Army learn mathematics and military skills (Tyler, 2005, p. 49).

ordered to retain employment (Costa, 1988, p.14). These two departments helped to link education and literacy with employment and progress. Kremen (1974) points out,

the preoccupation with manpower utilization since the end of the Second World War reflected the nation's response to certain critical historical factors. The legacy of the depression had served to heighten the country's sensitivity to the issues of unemployment and economic growth. The dawn of the Atomic Age had witnessed the implementation of a new technology that threatened to replace men with machines. Furthermore, the imperatives of the Cold War, with its accent on scientific preeminence, had revealed America's weakness in training skilled technicians in sufficient numbers.<sup>6</sup>

The federal government, driven by fear and pride, took official action and invested in human capital development. No one wanted to return to the dire conditions of the Great Depression, and while scientific progress was essential for global competition, the fear was that machines would take over if people were not trained for new kinds of employment. The program was aimed at 400,000 people and was to last for three years, but the plan was altered when proponents realized that many of the targeted adults lacked basic literacy, complicating their participation in the program. The program changed in order to address the needs of two groups: those who needed occupational training and those who needed greater development of basic literacy in order to access occupational training. Compensation for trainees was offered in the form of an allowance with funds provided by Congress and with local and state support (Kremen, 1974). This vocational emphasis continued with the 1963 Vocational Education Act which focused on preventing students from dropping out of high school as well as working with adults—dropouts and graduates—who needed vocational training (Costa, 1988, p. 15). Literacy needs were subsumed in the vocational goals of the educational programs.

In 1964, the Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) created Adult Basic Education (ABE) as a federal program, further emphasizing the government's belief that literacy education revolved around economic and employment issues. On March 16th, 1964, President Lyndon Johnson told Congress that "The Act does not merely expand on old

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> http://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/mono-mdtatext.htm#

programs or improve what is already being done. It charts a new course. It strikes at the causes of poverty . . . Not just the consequences of poverty. It can be a milestone in our 180-year search for a better life for your people"<sup>7</sup> (*Internet History Sourcebooks Project*). This Act was a part of the War on Poverty, and its purpose was to "eliminate the paradox of poverty in the midst of plenty in this nation by opening, to everyone, the opportunity for education and training, the opportunity to work, and the opportunity to live in decency and dignity"<sup>8</sup> (Department of Community Services and Development). It created adult literacy initiatives that exist today, including Job Corps and Work Study.

The Economic Opportunity Act focused on adult literacy almost exclusively as an employment concern. Literacy was in service to the sponsor's needs, and adults who wished to access the services were forced to adopt the focus on jobs. The EOA states, "It is the purpose of this legislation to initiate programs of instruction for persons 18 years old and older whose inability to read or write the English language constitutes a substantial impairment of their ability to obtain or retain employment" (National Advisory Council, 1980, p. 9-10). Adult Basic Education (ABE) was just one of eleven programs coordinated by the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to resolve this impairment, but a few names show the clear primary focus on employment: The Job Corps, Neighborhood Youth Corps, Work Study, Assistance for Migrant Agricultural Employees, and Work Experience (Pollack, 2004). States could receive grants from the OEO for pilot projects, special materials, instruction, and program development, but they had to submit plans and reports for all adult programs (National Advisory Council, 1980, p. 11-12). The government was willing to sponsor adult literacy but only on its own terms and for its own purposes.

A closer look at the Title II B of Public Law 88-452 of the EOA, which established the Adult Basic Education Act, confirms a sponsor-centered, not a learnercentered, set of literacy initiatives. Costa (1988) describes this Act as "the first time the federal government has allotted funds directly for literacy instruction" (p. 16). ABE was born as a federally supported program, but the emphasis was employment, not literacy. The 11 programs targeted economic and employment concerns rather than supporting

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1964johnson-warpoverty.html

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> http://www.csd.ca.gov/AboutUs/History.aspx

literacy learning as an end in and of itself. The ABE program "sought to remedy the inequities of educational disadvantage by offering persons 18 years of age . . . and older the opportunity to develop reading, writing, language and arithmetic skills to enable them to obtain or retain employment and otherwise participate more fully as productive and responsible citizens" (National Advisory Council, 1980, p. 10). It was part of a larger act, crowded with ten additional projects designed to combat poverty by training and educating youth for employment, assisting impoverished communities with social services, increasing the volunteer work force, and strengthening the economy.

In 1966, The Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) passed the responsibility of ABE to the Office of Education, a move that, on the surface, might suggest a shift away from linking literacy with employment toward making it a purely educational concern. However, Halperin (2006), who served as Assistant U.S. Commissioner of Education for Legislation and Deputy Assistant Secretary for Legislation in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare during the years 1961-1969, argues that this relocation of ABE was

much less the result of adult educators' lobbying efforts than of OEO's desire to rid itself of an unwelcome burden and, more especially, of the energetic campaign of Edith Green of Oregon, subcommittee chairman for higher education issues on the House Committee on Education and Labor. Mrs. Green, a formidable education leader, was strongly critical of President Johnson's war on poverty and, particularly, of the powers and funds it conferred on the new OEO 'super-czar agency' to intervene in the traditional operations of many levels of government, including schools.<sup>9</sup>

ABE, it seems, was an "unwelcome burden," probably because sponsors wrongly assumed that literacy instruction was an efficient way of tackling the employment issues. This transfer created the 1966 Adult Education Act (AEA) with its purpose "to encourage and expand basic educational programs for adults to enable them to overcome English language limitations, to improve their basic education in preparation for occupational training and more profitable employment, and to become more productive and responsible citizens" (National Advisory Council, 1980, p. 14). While the title of the act

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> http://librarian.lishost.org/?p=628

suggests a focus on adult education, this act, like past legislation, privileged employment as the desired outcome of basic education. The AEA also provided funding for training instructors in ABE. The National Teacher Training Adult Basic Education Program was formed as a council to develop curricula to be used in teacher training around the country (Costa, 1988, p. 17). Participants who attended the summer workshops were expected to carry their training back to their communities and share it with others.

The move to another federal sponsor did lead to revision for the purposes and design of ABE, but the emphasis remained on the needs of the sponsor. The government had recognized earlier that additional training worked for some, but that others struggled with accessing the training because of their literacy skills. The AEA provided three important definitions that gave greater structure and attention to adult literacy education than the previous act:

Adult: Any individual who has attained the age of eighteen.

Adult education: Services or instruction below the college level for adults who do not have a certificate of graduation from secondary school or who are not currently enrolled in schools.

Adult basic education: Education for adults whose inability to speak, read, or write the English language constitutes a substantial impairment of their ability to get or retain employment, with a view to making them less likely to become dependent on others, to improving their ability to benefit from occupational training and otherwise increasing their opportunities for more profitable and productive employment, and making them better able to meet their adult responsibilities. (National Advisory Council, 1980, p. 14)

These definitions describe the kinds of people that the government wished to target and the kind they wished to create. The assumption was that the public schools would be able to handle the literacy needs of those under 18. The Act also divided adult learners into two important groups: those needing certification/documentation of their pre-college skills (like the GED) and those whose literate abilities were problematic in a number of ways. Adults who qualified for ABE instruction were those whose literacies made employment difficult, led to dependence (and interdependence), affected their economic

earning abilities, and made them more like minors than responsible adults. This sorting would make it easier for the government to accomplish its goals and suggests that the government assumed all adult learners could be turned into contributing workers.

The AEA with its emphasis on producing literate workers continued to be the chief legislation for adult literacy education through the late 1960s and 1970s with a number of changes. First, numbers of participants increased. In 1965 Adult Education State Grant programs had fewer than 40,000 adults enrolled, but by 1979, programs were serving almost two million adult participants (Costa, 1988, p.85). This expansion was facilitated by changes made to the AEA. In 1969, the act was amended to increase the pool of adult participants. Persons who had not achieved a twelfth-grade education became eligible for programs, increasing the target population from 24 to 69 million adults (p. 18). Another change was made to the definition of *adult*. In 1970, the age of adulthood was lowered from 18 to 16 years of age, further increasing potential numbers.

The AEA also revised its statement of purpose over the space of 12 years. The language became less deficit-loaded, replacing words associated with struggle like *overcome* and *limitations*, but the sponsor's emphasis on employment remained. The three statements are as follows:

(1966) To encourage and expand basic educational programs for adults to enable them to overcome English language limitations, to improve their basic education in preparation for occupational training and more profitable employment, and to become more productive and responsible citizens.

(1970) To expand educational opportunity and encourage the establishment of programs of adult public education that will enable all adults to continue their education to at least the level of completion of secondary school and make available the means to secure training that will enable them to become more employable, productive and responsible citizens.

(1978) To expand educational opportunities for adults and to encourage the establishment of programs of adult education that will:

-enable all adults to acquire basic skills necessary to function in society,

—enable adults who so desire to continue their education to at least the level of completion of secondary school, and
—make available to adults the means to secure training that will enable them to become more employable, productive, and responsible citizens. (Costa, 1988, p. 81)

The 1970 revision introduced a secondary level education as the minimum requirement, suggesting that this educational attainment is necessary in order to function as a good citizen. The 1978 revision also included the secondary school completion level. The 1966 AEA had stated that it wished "to enable them [adults] to overcome English language limitations to improve their basic education," but the 1978 version introduced a clear definition of functional literacy with the words "enable all adults to acquire basic skills necessary to function in society." These later revisions also described the potential citizen as "employable, productive, and responsible" while the original separated employment from citizenship: "more profitable employment, and to become more productive and responsible citizens." This change suggested that a good citizen is employable or employed.

All three versions share a clear conflation of literacy with employment and citizenship. Literacy is not a goal worthy of funding on its own, but it must be tied to something else. Literacy development is but a step toward something else, an early phase in a sequence that allows adults to participate in occupational training, which gives them access to employment and better (more profitable) employment, which creates or defines productive and responsible citizens. The AEA did not seek to provide literacy instruction so that adults might improve their literacy practices *or* get a better job. The basic literacy skills were part of a larger package that became most clearly defined in the 1978 statement of purpose, with functional literacy beginning the list of objectives that culminates in a sequence highlighting educational attainment, employability, and citizenship.

The federal government's emphasis on concrete outcomes can be seen clearly in the expansion of the GED program. During the 1960s, it experienced a dramatic increase

in the number of participants. The number jumped from 42,000 test-takers in 1954 to 88,000 in 1963 (Tyler, 2005, p. 48-49). Tyler (2005) links this growth to a number of factors including the Baby Boom, the civil rights movement, and widespread college admissions acceptance of the credential. By 1970, the number of test-takers increased to 300,000.

In the 1970s, the concept of functional literacy gained strength, while criticism of adult literacy education increased. This criticism, however, came from other sponsors. More researchers and practitioners began to challenge the functional pragmatism of adult literacy education, with its clear connection to employment and economic independence. Perhaps this is why Sticht (1988-89) labels the 1970s as the "Time of Turmoil and Uncertainty" (p. 88). In 1971, a significant development in adult literacy arrived in the form of an assessment sponsored by the U.S. Office of Education. The Adult Performance Level (APL) study was developed to measure functional competence, that is, what adults need to know and be able to do in order to function in society. APL research had "65 objectives—required for adult living—keyed to five general-knowledge areas. The research team conducted extensive studies and described three levels of functional competency within each category. These levels are associated with different levels of adult success as measured by income, job status, and education" (Hunter & Harman, 1979, p. 18). The necessary knowledge areas included consumer economics, occupational knowledge, community resources, health, and government and law (Northcutt, 1975, p. 2).

The APL represents a continuation of the use of the problem model to motivate the work of adult literacy. The study was not a report of adults' thoughts on their literacy and the ways they functioned in the world but a passing of judgment on adults who were not literate enough to function in society. It was published in 1975 in *Adult Functional Competency A Report to the Office of Education Dissemination Review Panel* and "sought to clarify the extent to which adult functioning in a complex, print-based society was a national problem" (Demetrion, 2005, p. 11). The APL study documented that "approximately one in five Americans is incompetent or functions with difficulty and that about half of the adult population is merely functional and not at all proficient in necessary skills and knowledges" (Northcutt, 1975, p.12).

The findings of the APL study generated controversy when the report was released to the media (Beder, 2007, p. 97). Generally, people were alarmed that so many adult Americans found it difficult to function in society because of their current literate competence. Supporters of the study favored its approach of using competencies rather than the previous standards of age and grade level completion to describe literate abilities in the context of adult lives. The competencies were connected with tasks in adult daily life, such as reading a movie schedule. Some critics, however, commented that the researchers did not seek out "hard-to-reach" adults who were not readily available for interviews, neither did the research include non-economically driven objectives that might relate to personal growth or improved relationships (Hunter & Harman, 1979, p. 18). Additionally, functional contexts are specific and so cannot be readily generalized to the larger population. What one person does to function is society is not identical to the neighbors' practices (Levine, 1982).

Emphasis on the individual adult learner's literacy needs arrived in 1979 when Carman St. John Hunter and David Harman, sponsored by the Ford Foundation, published the landmark *Adult Illiteracy in the United States*. They also used a problem focus, but the problem for them was in the ways adult literacy was being conceptualized. The authors endorsed the concept of functional literacy but wished to "place the burden of describing levels and needed skills on the individuals concerned and on the social groups to which they belong" (p. 7). They wanted learners to have the authority over their literacy, to be authors of their own literacy and find ways to measure it. It was also remarkable because the researchers suggested that adult learners should define literacy for themselves, and the authors defined functional literacy as

the possession of skills *perceived as necessary by particular persons and groups* to fulfill their own self-determined objectives as family and community members, citizens, consumers, job-holders, and members of social, religious, or other associations of their choosing. This includes the ability to obtain information they want and to use that information for their own and other's well-being; the ability to read and write adequately to satisfy the requirements *they set for themselves* as being important for

their own lives; the ability to deal positively with demands made on them by society; and the ability to solve the problems they face in their daily lives. (p. 7-8) [original italics]

This definition was a move away from definitions provided by sponsors such as APL, and it positioned adult learners as the agents of their own literacy learning. Hunter and Harman emphasized the decision-making power of the adults who choose based on what they think they need, moving away from an essentialized notion of literacy and toward definitions that "are relative to time and space" (p. 12). This push, however, was not taken up by the federal government.

Sponsors continued to promote ready solutions to the problems of adult education and literacy. In particular, the GED program increased in popularity significantly through the 1970s, achieving its highest number of test-takers in 1980 with 816,000 test-takers (Tyler, 2005, p. 49). In 1970, the AEA had lowered the age of adulthood from 18 to 16 years of age, increasing the potential population for GED programs. In 1974, the credential was issued in all 50 states and the test series was revised in 1978.<sup>10</sup> The federal government seemed very willing to support such programs that provided solutions for the problem of high school dropouts. In some ways, this can be seen as a redirecting of emphasis away from addressing the issue of dropping out, with sponsors choosing to tackle the result rather than the root.

In the 1980s, the federal government sought to share the responsibility for the problem of literacy/illiteracy with a greater number of private sponsors. In 1983, President Ronald Reagan established the Adult Literacy Initiative in order to address the "hidden problem of adult illiteracy"<sup>11</sup> that was affecting the nation's economy. Costa (1988) outlines the Initiative's four objectives: "(1) generate national awareness; (2) promote public/private sector partnerships and encourage volunteerism; (3) provide technical and networking assistance; and (4) coordinate federal literacy activities within the Department of Education and with other departments and agencies" (p. 19). Robinson (1985) points out that the Initiative sought to improve what was already in place and to promote more cooperation between public and private sponsors.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup>http://www.acenet.edu/Content/NavigationMenu/ged/pubs/GED Testing Program Fact Sheet v2 2010. pdf

http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1983/90783a.htm

This emphasis on collaboration, however, aimed to reduce government financial support and involvement in ABE work, placing the federal focus on employment and giving more adult literacy concerns over to the private sector. Adult literacy education was a problem that the government could not handle on its own or did not wish to handle exclusively. Kozol (1985) comments, "The government's 'initiative,' therefore, was even more deficient than that timid word implied. It wasn't a struggle. It wasn't a campaign. Above all, it was not a demonstration that the federal government had finally perceived its own responsibility to sponsor and directly fund an all-out answer to a crisis which it had defined as being national in scope and danger" (p. 51). Whether or not it is read as shirking responsibility or sharing responsibility, it represents a move backwards in time when volunteers, motivated by their own religious and moral agendas, sponsored adult literacy programs. Passing responsibility on to the wider community increased the pool of sponsors without increasing learner agency.

For example, the Adult Literacy Initiative emphasized volunteerism as a strategy for addressing adult literacy education. President Reagan, in remarks delivered when announcing the initiative, said, "Let us today resolve to roll up our sleeves and get to work, because there's very much to be done. Across this great land, let those of us who can read teach those who cannot. Let the lights burn late in our classrooms, our church basements, our libraries, and around our kitchen tables -- wherever we can gather to help others help themselves to the American dream."<sup>12</sup> This was reminiscent of methods from the 1930s when Frank Laubach, Apostle to the Illiterates, created the "Each One Teach One" program. The push was for ordinary citizens to assist with promoting and facilitating adult literacy. For example, B. Dalton Booksellers sponsored its own National Literacy Initiative (Costa, 1988, p. 20). Stubblefield and Keane (1994) argue that "the Reagan administration wanted greater state and private voluntary responsibility for literacy and a lesser role for federal government" (p. 302). Clark and Amiot (1981) describe the Reagan Administration's approach to federal education policy using five Ds: diminution, deregulation, decentralization, disestablishment, and de-emphasis (p. 258). ABE became less of a federal responsibility and more of a state and private concern.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1983/90783a.htm

The 1990s saw an increase in the number of acts and reports relating to adult literacy. Employment remained the main priority for the federal government, with greater emphasis on assessment. Programs had to prove themselves worthy to receive and continue funding, and, by extension, adult learners had to be worthy of the sponsors' efforts. Sponsors and adult learners that did not meet targets and have satisfactory outcomes were in danger of being cut. The federal government was ensuring that programs that had alternate goals would not receive federal funding. On July 25, 1991, President George H. Bush signed The National Literacy Act of 1991, and it was incorporated into the Adult Education Act. This new act defined literacy as "an individual's ability to read, write, and speak in English, and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one's goals, and develop one's knowledge and potential" (Irwin, 1991, p. 2). This definition was significant in that no definition for literacy had been included in the original Adult Education Act. Eyre (1998) offers the following highlights from the National Literacy Act:

- Increased authorization for literacy programs
- Established a National Institute for Literacy
- Authorized state literacy resource centers
- Created national workforce demonstration projects
- Established literacy programs for incarcerated individuals
- Created "indicators" of program quality
- Required "Gateway Grants" to public housing authorities<sup>13</sup>

In particular, the act established the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) which would "enhance the national effort to eliminate the problem of illiteracy by the year 2000 by improving research, development and information dissemination through a national research center" (*NIFL Report on Activities and Accomplishments*, p. 52). The President had as one of the educational goals of his administration that "By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship" (Irwin, 1991, p.7). Government sponsorship aimed for stricter oversight, monitoring, and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> http://www.naepdc.org/issues/AEAHistort.htm.

assessment in adult education, with deadlines that did not take into account the individual needs and lives of learners or the complex work of adult literacy instruction.

This urgency to sort out the adult literacy problem before the new millennium was economically driven in more than one way. In the past, sponsors promoted the goal of making adults employable as the best way to strengthen the economy. This impulse continued, but the federal government reduced the budget for making this happen. Instead of supporting literacy initiatives aimed specifically at the ABE populations, the newly elected Republican Congress favored reducing educational budgets and consolidating program funding into block grants. Demetrion (2005) writes that "the conservative call for substantial slashing of the educational budget along with welfare reform and reducing ABE to workforce education had an enduring impact on state and federal government policy in the mid-1990s" (p. 88). Legislators were interested in results—clear outcomes that were connected with employment. While previous legislation sometimes acknowledged that adults wanted to enhance their literacies for reasons other than employment, workforce became the dominant focus.

In 1998, the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) replaced both the Adult Education Act of 1969 and the National Literacy Act of 1991. The nomenclature alone suggested a clear concentration in purpose for federal involvement in adult literacy education. This act included Title II, the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act. The WIA's purpose was to give "workers the information, advice, job search assistance, and training they need to get and keep good jobs" (Demetrion, 2005, p. 94). The new act stressed accountability and outcomes, and it pulled together various adult education programs under a common purpose. Demetrion (2005) argues that this emphasis on the workforce, of linking education directly with employment, "was a logical culmination of a fourdecade history of federal policy" (pp. 99-100). The Act also established the first "statelevel accountability system for ABE, with an incentive system tied to performance measures (Condelli, 2007, p. 11). Accountability became the newest buzzword in sponsored programs with government sponsors requiring it in new ways and smaller sponsors having to report progress back to their funders.

In the 1990s, the National Reporting System (NRS) established core measures outcome, descriptive, and participation—for programs to use when reporting their

progress. The NRS is administered by the Division of Adult Education and Literacy in the Office of Vocational and Adult Education in the U.S. Department of Education. The primary outcome measures included "educational gain, employment, and the attainment of school diploma and equivalency, or placement in post secondary education or training" (Demetrion, 2005, p. 104 quoting U.S. Department of Education, 2001, p. 3). The NRS tells its own story on its website:<sup>14</sup>

> The NRS began in the 1990s, during the trend towards greater accountability for educational and employment programs. In 1993, through the Government Performance and Review Act (GPRA), all Federal agencies were required to develop strategic plans to demonstrate that they are reaching their goals.

In 1995, citing a lack of data on program effectiveness, the adult education program was threatened with integration into a general system of workforce development. In response, the State directors of adult education asked the Division of Adult Education and Literacy (DAEL) to develop a national system for collecting data on adult education student outcomes.

At the national DAEL meeting held in March 1997, adult education stakeholders validated the framework and identified outcome measures for a new national reporting system for adult education (NRS). A collaborative effort was undertaken to develop the NRS during 1997-1998. After the passage of Workforce Investment Act (WIA), NRS became mandatory. Implementation of the NRS began in 1999 and continued to be refined over the next couple of years. In 2000, states began submitting their student and program outcomes to DAEL. Current NRS activities focus on perfecting the system to demonstrate program effectiveness and improve student outcomes.

The NRS became the mandatory overseer and determiner of satisfactory progress. Adult learners had not had the power to assess and label their own progress in the past, and now

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> http://www.nrsweb.org/about/history.aspx

sponsored programs found themselves with less independence, reporting mandatory outcomes to a higher authority, that is, if they wanted to receive federal funding.

The GED program was one of the sponsors that wished to comply with the assessment standards of the 1990s in order to ensure its funding. Tyler (2005) argues that the 1990 Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS), the 1993 National Institute for Literacy (NIFL), the 1998 Workforce Investment Act (WIA), and the National Reporting System (NRS) all affected the content and delivery of the GED tests. In 1997, for example, ACE increased the passing standards of their tests, bringing them in line with federal requirements. Federal sponsors, like NRS, favored GED programs because they provided clearly documented outcomes—number of passes and pre-and post-test scores—that could be used to judge a program's effectiveness (p. 52). ACE continued to revise its tests, attending to the government's assessment requirements and producing a new series in 2002.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the adult literacy education system remains a patchwork of legislation, policy, sponsorship, and research, cobbled together from its history of the last century. As in the 1990s, the emphasis on accountability to federal sponsors has remained strong at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the public school system, for example, No Child Left Behind (2001) focused on accountability, outcomes, and assessments. The NRS is similar and continues monitoring the federally funded work of adult literacy. As in the 1980s, much of the work in adult literacy programs is still done by volunteers. According to the U.S. Department of Education Division of Adult Education and Literacy (2000), 42% of the workers involved in federally funded adult literacy programs are volunteers (Belzer, 2007, p. 107). As in the 1970s, assessments of functional literacy such as the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) and the 2004 Reading at Risk survey have led many to calls for action to attend to the crises of illiteracy. As with the 1960s, adult literacy programs continue to have a strong emphasis on employment. For example, ABE information on the U.S. Department of Education website is housed under the Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE),<sup>15</sup> and the Workforce Investment Act continues as the chief legislation directing adult literacy education. None of these sponsored efforts has satisfactorily resolved the 'problem' of literacy/illiteracy in the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultEd/index.html

United States, even by sponsors' own standards, and perhaps this is where the real problem lies. Sponsors have relied on themselves as the primary resource for addressing literacy, all the while ignoring the greatest resource: adult learners.

# **Participation**

Despite sponsors' focus on creating a literate population in the United States, adult literacy programs have been unable to attract or unable to retain their target populations. Apart from budgets, the most discussed issue for adult literacy programs relates to participation rates, with two main concerns: making sure that those who are eligible have access and ensuring that those who have access remain within programs. To put it another way, many learners for whom programs have been crafted never enroll, and, when they do, some of those learners participate in ways that sponsors find frustrating.

Programs sponsored by the federal government and the private sector can have the best of intentions, informed research, and careful planning, but often the populations that are eligible for adult literacy programs are never reached; that is, the system could include many more participants. Even if one considers that multiple ways of defining and testing literacy can result in varying figures, the overall picture suggested by sponsors' quantitative data is one of failure. In 1969, The Adult Basic Education Act of 1966 was amended by the Adult Education Act to target almost 70 million adults, yet in 1970, just over a half a million participated (Costa, 1988, p. 85). The Adult Performance Level study in the 1970s reported that "approximately one in five Americans is incompetent or functions with difficulty and that about half of the adult population is merely functional and not at all proficient in necessary skills and knowledges" (Northcutt, 1975, p. 12). This range of 20-50% of the adult population suggested that the pool of beneficiaries was very large, yet in 1979, less than two million adults were a part of State Grant Programs (Costa, 1988, p. 85). Thirty years ago, Hunter and Harman (1979) commented that between 54 and 64 million Americans qualified for adult literacy education, but "only 2 to 4 percent of them even enter the programs" (p. 103). The National Adult Literacy Survey (1993) assessed literacy needs and concluded that 44 million Americans had limited literate abilities.

More recently, Sticht (2000) reported that between the years 1992 and 1996, only 15.5 million adults participated in adult literacy programs (p.3). Of those in adult literacy programs, about one third participated in ESL programming, another third in ABE programs, and about one quarter pursued a high school credential (p. 3). While these figures indicate that large numbers have been served by adult literacy programs, many others are not participating. Sticht (2000) estimated that in 2000 about 5 million adults would participate when over 40 million adults were without high school diplomas, and over 90 million adults had literacy levels lower than what is recommended by the National Governor's Association (p. 20). Adults are showing up, but the percentage attending in comparison with the numbers that sponsors determine are in need of literacy instruction is small.

From a sponsor's perspective, even more problematic is that those who do find their ways into programs quite often do not stay as long as sponsors expect them to remain. Large numbers of students register but never attend, attend for a few sessions before disappearing, or attend with such irregularity that completion, according to sponsor standards, is impossible. Research has shown that if adult learners do not stay in programs, they will find it difficult to enjoy significant literacy gains (Tracy-Mumford, Baker, Bristow, Companiony, Marshall, Matthews, . . . & Mumford, 1994). The percentages for attrition reported from multiple sources at different times vary between 40 and 75 percent, leading to an often quoted statistic that approximately half of all adult participants will leave the programs before officially completing the requirements (Brod, 1995; Cain & Whalen, 1977; Lewis, 1997; Limage, 1990; Quigley, 1998).

Knowing that adults are leaving, however, is only a part of the situation because attendance figures do not explain why they are leaving. Sponsors have not been complacent in trying to determine the forces affecting adult participation, but often research into reasons for leaving has focused primarily on the programs, as is obvious in the terms *retention* and *attrition*. Accountability has frequently been a numbers game, with federal and state funding requirements insisting upon input and output figures such as attendance and test scores (Beder, 1999). The focal point is the program and its agency. *Retention* refers to the ways a program keeps or retains participants, while *attrition* refers to the ways in which numbers in a program decrease, erasing the

perspective of the adult learner. Sponsors treat adult learners in adult literacy programs as passive participants, not as active decision-makers.

Giving primary attention and responsibility for participation to sponsors, however, has been problematic. While some researchers have recognized that adult learners traditionally have had very little agency and decision-making power in adult literacy programs and have suggested ways that adults can be empowered (Bingman, Ebert, & Bell, 2000; Hamann, 1994; Kerka, 1995), most have focused on external social and economic factors. By focusing on the external, many researchers have overlooked internal, personal factors that potentially influence adult learners' participation patterns. Some research has already shown how adult learners' perceptions of a program influence motivation and participation, such as whether or not it is defined in their minds as a second chance at traditional schooling (Cervero & Fitzpatrick, 1990; Quigley, 1992; Wikelund, Reder, & Hart-Landsberg, 1992). Some learners will not enroll and others will not attend if they conflate the program with their unsuccessful childhood schooling experiences. Sponsors might not picture their programs as school-like, but their impressions and intentions do not override the associations with schooling that many adults possess. The understandings of literacy, the meanings that all stakeholders-adult learners, instructors/ tutors, and sponsors—bring to a program have a potentially powerful influence over the direction of learning. While many scholars have discussed how the definitions of literacy change and develop over time (Venezky, Wagner, & Ciliberti, 1990), most of the attention has been on literacy as defined by sponsors of literacy—the government, private institutions, and the academy—not on the understandings that adult learners have and the expectations that spring from those understandings.<sup>16</sup>

Some studies have considered more closely the motivations and stories of adults (Fingeret & Drennon, 1997; Grabill, 2001; Purcell-Gates, 1995), but most have not used qualitative methods, such as interviews and ethnography, to obtain extensive and descriptive information regarding adult participation in programs. Entrance and exit surveys and interviews have often been brief, and they have aimed to provide statistical information that satisfies federal grant requirements. For example, the National Reporting

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> The role of sponsors in defining literacy is discussed more fully in the next chapter.

System (NRS) developed measures to assess the eligibility and success of a wide variety of adult literacy programs, but it privileged "standardized statistical data" while relegating to secondary status any data from "sampling, multimeasures, and 'thick [ethnographic] description" (Demetrion, 2005, p. 103-104). One result has been that the stories have often been told from the perspectives of sponsors, with learners having little authorship in their own literacy narratives.

The majority of the research has been limited in the approach used for gathering adult responses, and it has not fully explored the potential conflicts that might lead to leaving. For example, Lytle (1991) observes that "Recent research on participation, as well as the limited data available from evaluations of adult literacy programs, found that adult learners' goals in entering literacy programs are often not congruent with what funders or program designers envision" (p. 394). Sponsors need to know more about why adult learners enroll when they do and why they choose to participate in the ways that they do. Without consistent direct and collaborative input into the ways literacy is defined and offered, adults may have found another way to communicate: with their feet.

#### A Closer Look at Participation

The sponsor-oriented terms *retention* and *attrition* are very telling choices for describing the phenomena of students remaining in and leaving programs, and the terms are both illuminating and unhelpful. They illuminate the ways that literacy often has been conceptualized in adult literacy programming, with the emphasis on the perspectives of the program/institution. They are unhelpful for this very reason, not showing the complexities of the relationships between adult learners and the programs in which they are involved, neither fully revealing the reasons why they complete or remove themselves from these programs. The term *retention* refers to holding on to something, and it can refer to maintaining possession of something, almost in an involuntary fashion. Retention is conceptualized from the viewpoint of the program or its sponsor, not from the learners. The adult participants are not represented as having a significant role; rather, it is the program that must corral and secure them, prevent them from leaving. The effort is one-sided. *Attrition* is not a more gracious term. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (2000) defines *attrition* in the following ways: "1. A rubbing away or

wearing down by friction. 2. A gradual diminution in number or strength because of constant stress. 3. A gradual, natural reduction in membership or personnel, as through retirement, resignation, or death." While the third definition is clearly the one most applicable to adult literacy education, the others reveal a very negative set of connotations. Again, the focus is on the program and not the learner, and attrition is not seen as something that can be positive. Some research shows that adults have positive reasons for leaving, such as achieving their goals early (Pugsley, 1987), but this potential is often not recognized in the definitions or in the literature.

The perspectives of the federal government and other literacy sponsors have influenced adult literacy research. Researchers<sup>17</sup> often rely on the sponsors' terms *attrition* and *retention* when examining adult participation as with *Attrition in Urban Basic Literacy Programs and Strategies to Increase Retention* (Bean, Partanen, Wright, & Aaronson, 1989) and "Completion and Attrition in Adult Basic Education" (Dirkx & Jha, 1994). Using the terms, without acknowledging the ways they position adult learners and their behaviors, reinforces the dominance of sponsor perspectives.

As a result, research on participation in adult literacy programs has often been conceptualized from a one-sided viewpoint: the program's perspective. Whether adult learners stay or go has been framed as a concern for administrators, instructors, and other sponsors. Much of the research observes adult learners without engaging them in open conversation about their participation or the research that researchers are conducting. Sponsors then extract information from the research and design interventions without adult learners offering any reflective contributions to the research through full interviews and explicit questioning.

Researchers have coined multiple terms to describe adult learner participation<sup>18</sup> in an attempt to show the complexity of their choices. When discussing learners who persist, the terms *completers*, *continuers*, and *persisters* have been used. For leaving,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> I realize that researchers, scholars, and theorists can be considered sponsors of literacy, but I treat them as a distinct group in the discussion of research. This helps to distinguish between those who design and implement adult literacy programs, and those who look at the ways that literacy functions in those programs and the world. This separation, however, is tenuous since many researchers are themselves tutors, teachers, and administrators in programs.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> I prefer the term *participation* to describe learner behavior because it encompasses motivation, attendance, commitment, and many other factors without strong positive or negative connotations. Even the more popular term *persistence* connotes approval.

terms like *stopouts*, *noncompleters*, and *noncontinuers* are common, while the term *dropout* is unusual. For example, Perin and Greenberg (1994) offer different categories to better describe the behaviors of adult learners:

- 1. Completers: attended more than 21 hours
- 2. Noncompleters: attended 2 weeks
- 3. Leavers: attended less than 12 hours
- 4. Nonattenders: enrolled but never attended.

Not all learners leave at the same time, and noncompleters and leavers have different reasons for not finishing. Dirkx and Jha (1994) use two categories:

- 1. Completers, continuers, and noncompleters
- 2. Noncompleters: early noncontinuers (fewer than 12 hours of instruction), late noncontinuers and stopouts.

While these terms are helpful in distinguishing different kinds of behaviors, they are terms chosen by researchers, not learners, and represent sponsors' categories and viewpoints. The terms become part of sponsors' vocabulary and language and are linked to sponsors' perception of the program. It is unlikely that learners view their participation success based on specific hour or day calculations. Additionally, since adult learners do not have access to these terms they often rely on words that they do know such as *dropout*, even if researchers eschew such words.

A significant collection of studies documents why learners leave adult literacy programs, usually constructed to help sponsors figure out how they can improve retention rates and approved outcomes. Learners are problems to be solved, and if they are studied carefully enough, then sponsors can use the research to craft and implement solutions. Bean, Partanen, Wright, and Aaronson (1989) describe three sets of significant factors: those connected with the student's situation, those associated with the program, and those relating to external influences such as child care. Cross (1982) points to three almost identical barriers that ABE learners face: situational, institutional and dispositional. While categories may help sponsors plan strategies for addressing participation concerns, they are not all equally revealing. Quigley (1998) suggests that all categories are not equally important: The third—and most enigmatic by far—is the area of dispositional barriers. Herein lies the curious inner world of unique attitudes, personal values, and unstated perceptions. Our learners often carry into our programs mixed emotions, many of which are negative, born of past schooling experiences. These may take up more space in their dispositional baggage than we usually want to acknowledge or are willing to explore. (p. 7-8)

Quigley (1998) acknowledges that much about learners' motivations and struggles remains hidden but powerful forces affecting participation. Identification is not enough. Sponsors need information about the internal lives of learners to better understand their behavior and decision-making.

Research indicates that adults often leave because of pressures outside of the program, including family, child care, and job (Hayes, 1988; Malicky & Norman, 1994; Wikelund, Reder, & Hart-Landsberg, 1992). These pressures are difficult for the program to tackle directly and are often felt to be outside of the control of the program. Quigley (1998) states, "We can try to help our students with the situations they face by referring them to resources. But we can only refer them, we can't be the resources" (p. 2). Adults must divide time, attention, and energy, negotiating home responsibilities, workplace demands, child-rearing, and the expectations of the program. Since these responsibilities predate enrollment in the literacy program, often the last in is the first out. How adult learners arrive at these decisions, however, has not been well studied. Research collects the reasons interviewees give but not as a part of a larger conversation which explores a combination (perhaps not a sequence) of events and influences. These outside pressures, therefore, are only a partial answer.

Other research suggests that learners may also leave if their expectations are not met. Adults sometimes provide programs with information concerning what they expect, what they hope to achieve, and what they feel the particular program is able to offer. The learner imagines what can be accomplished and when, but these expectations are not always met in the predicted ways, discouraging learners from continuing to participate. Kerka (1995) notes, "One cause of early withdrawal is a gap between learner expectations and reality. Adult learners may get frustrated early by lack of progress, or

they are not given enough information before enrollment to know when to expect change and what they must do to achieve it" (p. 2). Learners may not re-evaluate their expectations or may decide that the program is a poor match for them and leave, possibly immediately, but more likely gradually, through uneven attendance.

Learners are able to establish goals in relation to expectations and may leave when goals are met or when they are not met. Few consider that early withdrawal might be a positive action, a decision to move on because a learner's goals have been accomplished. According to Cullen (1994), sometimes "noncompletion is the most successful outcome" (p. iii). Circumstances may have changed in positive ways relocation, new job, and so on—leading learners to re-evaluate their goals and move on. Research, however, often cannot document this positive behavior because the learners are no longer in contact with sponsors, or the behavior is documented in quantitative data only. Of course, learners may leave if they feel that their goals are not being met as well. This can result when students change their goals or when instructors alter the goals of the program. A learner who wants something other than a GED may not be satisfied with a program that targets high school equivalency (Bingman, Ebert, & Bell, 2000). Without extensive and reflective communication from learners, this kind of leaving response will remain mysterious.

A very powerful reason for non-completion relates specifically to childhood schooling experiences. Often, adults who seek out a program have unpleasant memories of school. They were not successful students, and they tend to conflate literacy programs with school. This is not unusual since literacy has routinely been measured using the number of school grades completed (Gray, 1953; Hunter & Harman, 1979). This approach is no longer popular, but existed until 1980, affecting the way that literacy has been conceptualized. Denny (1992) observes that African Americans, in particular, have been failed by the school system and many do not trust it, creating a barrier to adult literacy education. Quigley (1998) argues that ABE students who are dropouts see school as a negative experience. They view the terms *education* and *learning* in a positive light, but they conflate the terms *literacy* and *ABE* with their negative school experiences (p. 4). Wikelund, Reder, and Hart-Lansberg (1992) state that adult participants might picture programs "as extensions or continuations of the school programs in which they have

previously experienced failure, loss of self-esteem, and lack of responsiveness to their personal needs and goals" (p. 4). Overcoming negative feelings and memories may be difficult and delay participation, but they may also lead students to withdraw if instruction resembles painful past classroom models. The research, however, does not make it clear the extent to which past schooling experiences affect participation, or the possibility that a poor childhood educational experience is a motivator for adult literacy learning, with adults anxious to have a better experience with learning.

Of course, it is possible for adult learners to experience several of these factors at once (Kerka, 1995). Qualitative studies have the advantage of exposing multiple influences and learning about the ways they affect participation. The cause for leaving does not need to be a single issue. For example, learners may have had negative schoolbased experiences as well as the additional factor of demanding home responsibilities, potentially making them all the more likely to leave than an adult with only one obstacle. No study exists documenting the possible combinations and their effects, but one can reasonably conjecture that the greater number of factors present, the more difficult it will be for learners to complete programs.

Finally, it is possible that research has not uncovered all of the reasons for why adult learners leave or cannot verify if the reasons gathered are valid. As the world changes, so do the circumstances and needs of adults. What may have been a small obstacle to employment in the past may become a major one. An office worker who could not use a computer in 1990 was valued very differently than one seeking a job in 2011, and so learner motivations will change with the times. Also, learners might offer reasons that they feel researchers and authorities will not judge negatively, or learners might supply immediate responses that they would revise later if asked the same question after an extended period for reflection. For example, in a study of nontraditional students at the University of Edinburgh, Cullen (1994) concludes that students will offer an answer that is safe (in their eyes) in order to protect their esteem. That means that the most recent pressure may be the one offered as an answer to interviews and surveys, or the embarrassment of perceived failure may cause learners to provide what they feel to be

more acceptable responses. This makes it essential that researchers continue returning to issues with participation that have already been studied.

If the previous list represents the factors that sponsors see as contributing to attrition, it would seem logical that correcting or removing them would improve retention. As Shirley Brod (1990) comments, "Obviously, resolving the problems that contribute to attrition should enhance retention" (p. 3). However, the literature does not suggest such easy one-to-one connections. First of all, much of the literature focuses on what programs can do for adult learners, not what adult learners can do in cooperation with sponsors to succeed. Secondly, some factors have no corresponding opposite, such as students leaving because goals are met early or because circumstances are altered by forces outside of the program. A poor instructor may not force a student to leave, but a good instructor may encourage one to continue in spite of numerous negative external pressures. Finally, factors that influence learners' decisions to stay may come from areas not directly connected to the program, areas that the literature has not considered.

Most of the literature agrees that the longer adult learners stay in a program, the more likely they will be to complete it. Quigley (1998) argues that the first three weeks of a program are the most critical. According to Kambouri and Francis (1994), most leavers remain only two to three weeks, and their findings are supported by Malicky and Norman (1994), suggesting that the most crucial time for influencing and supporting adult students is within the first few weeks of the program. This research, however, is not a complete answer because it does not reveal why learners even stay for the first few weeks.

Other research shows that learners continue in programs when they receive attention and support. In their examination of urban adult literacy programs, Bean, Partanen, Wright, and Aaronson (1989) identify significant risk factors that need early attention if students are to persist. Quigley (1997) reasons that, if students can be identified as at-risk early on and targeted with special attention, then persistence is more likely. In his research, Quigley compared a traditional control group with three other groups, one using counselors, one using peer interaction, and another using one-on-one tutoring. He found that the number of persisters was higher in the groups where more attention was provided, the highest being the group with peer interaction. In fact, "In all

events, any of the three treatments were an improvement over the traditional classroom for the at-risk" (Quigley, 1998, p. 8). Using counselors before and throughout a program can also provide motivating attention for completion (Cullen, 1994; Quigley, 1998). These studies make a causal link between attention and participation, but they do not offer information from the learner's perspective as to why these support networks make a difference. For example, in Quigley's research, students were not even aware they were in a study. Additional insight could be gathered if learners shared more reflective responses about their networks of friends, counselors, and classmates.

Sponsors note that adult continuers are created through frequent personal contact and through bonding with other adult learners. For example, Vanderpool and Brown (1994) examined the impact of telephone contact with students and discovered that students who were called were more likely to persist than those who were not called. This work with adult learners in higher education suggests that when peers or faculty make the effort to contact students, even with something as mundane as a telephone call, they feel a greater sense of connection with the program. Learners may also be encouraged to stay when they feel a part of the group. Vann and Hinton (1994) argue that those who are socially isolated within a program are more likely to drop out than those who belong to class cliques. It seems easier to succeed when one is reinforced and encouraged by the connection found in groups. Community encourages completion. Again, such conclusions are the result of observation of behavior and interventions rather than direct consultation with adult learners.

Some studies document that adults say they attend and remain for the sake of their children, in contrast to child care being listed as a factor that leads to attrition. Denny (1992) reports that parents want to be able to inspire their children. They wish to show them the value of education, and to participate with them in their educational activities, such as homework. While many adults want programs that will help them with the educational needs of their children, the adults do not wish to be treated as children. Successful programs, therefore, support curriculum for adult learners, not children. Rogers (2000), who studied an alternate model for literacy programs in groups outside of the United States, argues that adult learners must be treated as adults and literacy programs should avoid a classroom model because "The school-based attitude to

education is paramount here—learn first and then do later, rather than the adult learning approach of 'learn through doing'" (p. 237). According to Rogers, adults will be motivated if they are treated as adults.

Finally, success is an important motivating factor leading to continuance. The instructor and program must provide opportunities for success in each lesson to increase motivation. As Fingeret (1985) states, "Many students do not simply remain in a program because it feels 'good' to them. They remain because they see the potential for meeting their goals" (p. 112). Students must be able to perceive progress throughout, not just at the end. Brod (1990) argues that students, not just instructors, must see progress and the potential for success in order to continue. Tracy-Mumford, et al (1994) advocate building in opportunities for success into every class, and Hamann (1994) suggests inviting learners to demonstrate competence in alternate areas of expertise, such as using their own language. The meaning of success, however, is potentially varied, not just among students, but within a single student over time and relating to individual tasks. A GED student who barely passes the reading test might feel discouraged, while a similar grade on the mathematics portion would be characterized as a complete success.

Most of the research suggests that the needs, goals, and expectations of the adult learner should have top priority. Adults stay when they feel that the experience is valuable and they are valued. They leave when other responsibilities feel more important or immediate than the program and when they do not feel valued. It seems logical that soliciting more from adults, such as their understandings and expectations of literacy, and working with them to establish procedures based on their articulated understandings and expectations, would lead to more consistent attendance and improved completion rates for sponsors. More importantly, adult learners would have greater agency in their own educational development. Adults will still have to deal with the external pressures and responsibilities that they have always had to address, but they might find greater motivation for participation if given a voice in the discussion and a place in the conversation for their understandings and expectations of their literacy programs.

### Conclusion

Adult literacy education has been framed as a problematic investment since it began in earnest in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This framing often presents the government as an investor and the sponsored agencies as brokers trying to produce a satisfactory return. Adult learners are not the clients of programs; rather, the federal government is the sole client. For sponsors, low participation rates and high attrition represent losses and poor returns for the investor, while strong retention, high completion rates, and measurable outcomes (such as GED completion and employment) are dividends and profitable returns. Adults who do not have the reading and writing practices taught in compulsory schooling have been considered costly problems by the government and treated as risks to the nation's success, progress, and well-being. Adults who are not seen as literate have been judged as unfit for military service, unqualified for citizenship, and dangerous to the economy. Learners have not chosen these identities but have been positioned by sponsors who construct the crisis of illiteracy and implicitly or explicitly conflate learners with the crisis.

The strategies used by public and private sponsors to address the 'problem' of literacy have not paid off. They have not reached enough of the target populations, numbered in the millions, and those that they have reached often do not complete programs. When participants in adult literacy programs do not behave in ways that sponsors expect and require, they remain underdeveloped human resources. Researchers, often supported by sponsors, have investigated adult literacy programs, but much of the work represents the viewpoint of the sponsor. Researchers use sponsor terms—*attrition* and *retention*—and write for an audience of sponsors and other researchers. They develop solutions that only sponsors can implement to address sponsor-oriented concerns. Researchers do not report to learners. Without the learner's perspective, however, the research remains biased and incomplete, with sponsors having full control over the definition of literacy and the representation of adult learners.

#### Chapter 2

#### **Defining Adult Literacy**

# Introduction

In the previous chapter, I argued that sponsors maintain control of the characterization of adult literacy learners and the representation of literacy's/illiteracy's impact on the nation using a problem model, while positioning themselves as the problem-solvers. To sponsors' surprise and frustration, large portions of the target populations of adult learners participate in ways that sponsors see as unproductive. In this chapter, I argue that a central issue in complications surrounding participation is sponsors' domination over the meaning of literacy. Seeing themselves as the chief problem-solvers and investors has the consequence of suggesting that sponsors have the right to define literacy in the ways that they want or think best for learners. Many sponsors, including the federal government, do not seek out learners' understandings and often resist the work of academic researchers (also sponsors) who suggest approaches that are too costly, suggest complexity, or might disrupt their sole ownership and control over adult literacy.

I begin with an etymology of the term *literacy* before considering language theory that posits meaning making as an act of negotiation. I then consider the ways that literacy has been understood by sponsors and how their definitions and approaches to defining have dominated discussions of adult literacy and programming. Finally, I examine the limited research relating to learner understandings and explore how they have been influenced by sponsors' defining practices.

Definitions of literacy matter because they have a way of organizing understandings of the world. The meaning of literacy, however, is not static but dynamic, both over longer periods of time as well as in the immediate moment of a dialogue between two people. While most people would readily accept and expect that the meaning of any term might change significantly over time, fewer seem conscious of the

ways that meaning is negotiated on a daily basis. The meaning of any word is not fixed but is dependent on context and interlocutors. For example, the word *freedom* discussed among two inmates in prison has a very different meaning from the word when discussed by graduating seniors on the last day of school.

Dialogue between sponsors and learners has not been the model for establishing the meaning of adult literacy. The two groups have tended to have separate conversations, creating the potential for conflict and disconnection when they come together in adult literacy programs. Sponsors of adult literacy programming have drafted adult literacy policy, sometimes without ever offering a publicly articulated definition, although presumably, dialogic negotiation did occur among sponsors initially. More often, sponsors provide definitions crafted to suit their own needs and goals, ignoring the perspectives of adult learners or defining literacy on behalf of adult literacy learners. Learners often rely on certain meanings that sponsors endorse, consciously or otherwise, as when they interpret literacy through their schooling experiences or submit to the definitions articulated in a program's mission statement, possibly without ever reading it. On rare occasions, radical sponsors have turned over full control of the meaning of literacy to learners. What does not exist is a reciprocal practice of dialogic discourse that represents the direct input of both sponsors and learners.

# **Origin of the Term** *Literacy*

The term *literate* has been in the English language for over 550 years, and in that time it has undergone substantial transformation and expansion in meanings, both connotative and denotative. Literacy today is a palimpsest of understandings, many earlier understandings still visible beneath the most current usages. These conceptions do not exist in harmony with each other. Susan Lytle (1991) refers to "conflicting conceptions of literacy" (p. 400). Walt Wolfram (1988) states that words often come with "connotational baggage" that can place obstacles in the way of learning rather than lead to resolution (p. 113). Meanings can compete with each other and become distracting. For example, a more positive recent meaning does not mask earlier pejorative meanings.

The term *literacy* has a long history, which complicates current understandings of the term for sponsors and adult learners. The earliest recorded entry of *literate* suggests

that the term related to a formal education in letters or literature (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*).<sup>19</sup> The adjective form *literate* was first recorded sometime between 1432 and 1450 and means 'Acquainted with letters or literature; educated, instructed.' Being literate referred to formal studies and would have included the Classics. Only much later in the 1800s did the term and its variants target the general abilities of writing and reading apart from specific subjects. The original emphasis on education, however, did not vanish. Venezky (1987) notes that "remnants of the classical definition survived until at least the 1790s" (p. 3). It is not until 1894 that the term *literate* comes to mean 'One who can read and write.' So the earliest layers of meaning in the palimpsest are associated with levels of education.

A new layer of understanding developed in the following century with the term *illiterate*. One way of understanding the development of the term *literacy* is through the lens of binaries. If one person could be educated or have a certain kind of learning, then another might lack these skills or experiences. *Illiterate*, which is first recorded in 1556, meant 'Ignorant of letters or literature; without book-learning or education; unlettered, unlearned and later came to mean unable to read, i.e. totally illiterate.' Robert Tawdry (1604) in the first dictionary in English, *The Table Alphabeticall*, defined *illiterate as* 'vnlearned, without knowledge.' There was no continuum, no grading of educational attainment; one was either literate or illiterate. Being literate was a general competence.

The term *illiteracy* developed after *illiterate*, but before *literacy*, providing a noun for the adjective. *Illiteracy* made its first documented appearance in 1660 in *Rusticks Alarm*: "They have . . . nourish'd up Illiteracy itself." The meaning of 'lack of learning' in clearly seen in the 1782 reference in *Geography Magazine:* "The illiteracy of Mahomet made it necessary for him to find some more learned associate." This nominalization was a powerful development and began expanding meaning potential. *Illiteracy* could refer to a lack of the knowledge of letters or a lack of the ability to read and write, but it also could be generalized to represent a complete 'absence of education.'

In a chronological sense, *illiteracy* existed before *literacy*, and this order may help to explain why *literacy* has not become a purely positive or even neutral term. The word

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> All discussion relating to the origin of *literacy* and its variants is taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* unless otherwise noted.

*literacy* is fairly recent and is first recorded in the English language in 1883 in the *New England Journal of Education* in the following sentence: "Massachusetts is the first state in the Union in literacy in its native population." *The Journal* reports on Governor Benjamin Franklin Butler who wished to abolish special schools, like reform and industrial institutions. His use of *literacy* was a reaction to *illiteracy*, the inability to read and write, and he was seeking to focus on state-funded schools that would provide a practical education (Stankiewicz, p. 321). This first recorded use of the term is clearly rooted in the concept of reading and writing proficiency.

The terms *literacy* and *illiteracy*, however, have been understood and used in uneven ways. Sometimes they represent clear binaries of opposite meaning; at other times, the terms are not complete antonyms. Venezky (1987) points out,

> With some exceptions, *illiteracy* tends to be applied to those who fall below any recommended criterion level, no matter how arbitrarily derived. Thus, by some definitions those who read and write simple messages are placed in the same class as those totally ignorant of writing and alphabets. Furthermore, the terms are often defined asymmetrically. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (1954), for example, defined *literate* as 'able to read and write' but *illiterate* as 'unable to read.' Where *literate* is often modified to refine what level of literacy is implied (e.g., highly literate, marginally literate), *illiteracy* is rarely made more specific. (pp. 3-4)

Venezky makes clear that the development of meanings has not been tidy and predictable. This level of inconsistency means that interlocutors cannot assume an understanding of either term based purely on the introduction of the word.

This brief etymological survey of *literacy* shows how the concept has developed and expanded throughout time. Literacy/illiteracy and literate/illiterate have been linked with levels of education, reading and writing abilities, and knowledge. This dictionary survey, however, only references moments of distinct usages and does not reveal the political consequences of the meanings or even how speakers understand the words in context.

#### Meaning Making

Definitions of literacy matter because they have a way of organizing understandings of the world, but as any linguist or dictionary editor will admit, defining words is no easy task. While some may assume that the meaning of the term *literacy* is stable, even fixed, definitions can and do change frequently over time, as the previous etymology proves. Additionally, some have argued that making meaning is a constant dialogic process of negotiation so that even a single word used in a conversation might be understood in multiple, even conflicting ways, by those participating in the conversation. Herbert Blumer (1969), for example, developed the concept of symbolic interactionism, believing that people attribute meaning to things based on their interactions and interpretations, not on essentialized meanings. Following this model, meanings are offered and accepted, rejected, or finessed on a conversation-to-conversation basis, so that one should not assume agreement until the meaning is exposed through dialogue.

In order to better understand the ways in which sponsors and adult learners think about literacy and the part they play (or are not allowed to play) in shaping it, I draw on linguistic theory relating to meaning-making suggested by the work of Mikhail Bahktin. He theorizes that meaning is negotiated actively; it is not foundational and static. Bakhtin (1981) challenged linguists, such as Ferdinand de Saussure (1916), who endorsed the structuralist models of language that suggested that meaning could be fixed, giving a speaker or writer confident control over intended meaning. Bakhtin located the power to communicate in the speaker <u>and</u> the listener <u>and</u> in the space between the two. In *The Dialogic Imagination* Bakhtin writes, "A word forms a concept of its own object in a dialogic way" (p. 279). A word such as *literacy* or *illiterate* does not hold all meaning and interpretation; rather, meaning is constructed through dialogue. This dialogue includes what is in the present and what is anticipated in the future:

> The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction. Forming itself in an atmosphere of the already spoken, the word is at the same time determined by that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the

answering word. Such is the situation in any living dialogue. (Bahktin, 1981, p. 280)

In Bakhtin's construct, context matters, not in the way it can alter fixed meaning, but in the way that it is meaning. The atmosphere of what has been said and what is yet to be said is part of what determines meaning.

Bahktin's view proposes that words are not static repositories of meaning. He writes, "But no living word relates to an object in a singular way: between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object, the same theme, and this is an environment that it is often difficult to penetrate" (p. 276). Words do not have inherent and unambiguous meanings because words appear in context where they are shaped by other words. Even the most carefully selected terms may be interpreted in multiple ways.

# **The Power of Definitions**

Bahktin's theory of meaning making, the notion that meaning is established and exposed between people in context, has not been the dominant model in the work of adult literacy. At least, it has not been the way that meaning is established between sponsors and learners. Instead, sponsors, who already have substantial political authority, have dialogued among themselves, setting the definition of literacy for adult learners. So while the process of meaning making is evident in policies and acts relating to adult literacy, the definitions represent sponsors' perspectives and agendas.

The real issue, therefore, is not if the meaning of literacy is established through dialogue, but who is involved in the conversation. In "Defining Literacy: Paradise, Nightmare or Red Herring?" Roberts (1995) writes,

The struggle over definition, some claim, is more than a merely intellectual tussle; rather, the battle is a thoroughly political one. In asserting one definition of literacy over another certain groups seek to dominate others through controlling policy decisions, capturing a larger share of educational (and other) resources, and ensuring compliance to a given social order. (p. 413)

Choosing one definition over another involves political consequences. When those who are literate are able to label themselves as literate, they put themselves in charge of literacy.

The definition of literacy, the way that people picture and identify the concept, is about power. Cy Knoblauch (1990), who has worked with issues relating to authority in writing, pedagogy, and rhetoric, argues that "Invariably, definitions of literacy are also rationalizations of importance. Furthermore, they are invariably offered by the literate people, who are powerful (the reasoning goes) because they are literate and, as such, deserving of power" (p. 199). The differences are not harmless or accidental. They reflect a competition for control and power, and the people who are literate and in control get to define literacy, or more important, illiteracy, for everyone else.

Negotiating the meaning of literacy, even within restricted circles, is not without complications. Over 40 years ago, Paul Luebke (1966), writing for *the Community Development Journal*, commented that even deciding on a somewhat generalized meaning does not simplify the applications of the term. He writes,

A simple dictionary definition of the term "literacy" is "ability to read and write." In recent years tens of thousands of dedicated persons around the world have expended great energies, to say nothing of huge amounts of money, in the attempt to give this "ability to read and write" to the world's uneducated masses. But what specifically does this ability imply? Is this ability, in fact, measurable? If so, by what criteria is the ability to be measured? Are the criteria for assessing the extent of this ability universally applicable? Is there a relationship between the level of a person's reading and writing ability and the level of the society in which he lives? If so, which is the cause and which is the effect? Could the same persons be considered literate in one setting and illiterate in another? In short, what precisely is a "literate" person? (p. 33)

The simple definition he proposes—"ability to read and write"—is especially complicated because it leads to all of the questions that follow. His questions, however, represent sponsor perspectives, focusing on issues such as measurement, assessment, and reading levels. Also, whenever one includes certain meanings in a definition, one

excludes other meanings. The difficulty of defining literacy is not in the search for the right turn of phrase that accurately captures its meaning. Rather, the real complication of making meaning comes when one begins to probe the meaning makers, those responsible for creating and using the definition.

Adult learners often have little say in this definition-making process, and when they do, sponsors control the invitation and activity. Knoblauch (1990) states, "To the extent that the nonliterate allow themselves to be objects of someone else's 'kindness,' they will find no power in literacy, however it is defined, but only altered terms of dispossession" (p. 205). He contends that learners who submit to sponsors, even sponsors who have the best intentions, will not be empowered. Infrequently, learners have been given radical control of definition-making, leaving them to their own devices, which results in progress of an important but possibly limited nature. Learners lack the benefit of expanded vision from sponsors who may see potentials beyond their local experience and individual knowledge. For example, Alan Rogers (2000) endorses a "Literacy Second" model that waits for adults to request literacy programs and gives them only what they request. While this approach meets the perceived needs of adult learners, it might also preserve the status quo, since those requesting assistance might do so based on limited knowledge of literacy work. Giving full responsibility to adult learners to initiate literacy development might lead to positive but narrow advancement, based on the vision and knowledge they possess.

More often, however, adult learners have not been given a say and have accepted the definitions of sponsors, suppressing, repressing, or altering their understandings in order to avail themselves of the resources offered by sponsors. For example, adult learners have enrolled in courses that lead to sponsor-endorsed outcomes, such as General Education Development (GED) certification, when their understanding of literacy may not have included such goals. Or well-meaning sponsors might endorse expressivist definitions with which adult learners are unfamiliar and uncomfortable, believing these ideologies are best for all learners (Grabill, 2001).

The structure and dynamics of power, however, can be changed, and changing the meaning-making process offers great possibilities for literacy reform. Gathering and considering the understandings of literacy held by adult learners actively can challenge

sponsor-oriented understandings. Schiappa (2003) argues that denotative definitions can be challenged, leading to "definitional rupture" when groups dispute and reject meanings as no longer relevant or useful. (p. 3). This is not simply a matter of being startled with an unfamiliar meaning, which can be resolved by consulting an expert resource, such as a dictionary. It is a fundamental disagreement over meaning that results in an inability to accept or tolerate multiple (possible conflicting) understandings. Through a number of current debates over meaning, he shows that a lack of flexibility in negotiating meaning, of not recognizing that a single term can mean different things to different people, can lead to conflict. He advocates a "definitional practice" (p. 179) that would allow for all users of a term to recognize and consider the definitions held by others.

At the moment, definitional rupture seems unlikely since learners and sponsors do not dialogue intentionally to expose any variety of understandings of the term *literacy*. Academic scholars/ researchers have perhaps come closest to forcing a rupture with the shift that has moved research from examination of *literacy* to *literacies*.<sup>20</sup> The federal government and other sponsors, however, have resisted dialogue on these developments. Legislation relating to adult literacy, for example, continues to use the singular form of literacy, when it uses the term.

This resistance is potentially linked with the usual educational separation between research and practice, as in other academic fields and disciplines. Government sponsors favor quantitative research and efficiently packaged practice (Demetrion, 2005). Scholars/researchers have differing preferences as is evident in the journals, conferences, and other spaces in which adult literacy is the focus. For example, the Adult Education Research Conference (AERC) is "a forum for adult education researchers to share their experiences and the results of their studies with students, other researchers, and practitioners from around the world."<sup>21</sup> The Commission on Adult Basic Education (COABE), however, privileges practice. The *Adult Basic Education and Literacy* (ABEL) journal suggests a blend of research and practice, but keeps its articles in clearly separated sections with very different criteria for publication acceptance. Sponsors quite often can pick and choose scholars that align with their ways of thinking, ignoring others.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> This development is discussed more thoroughly in Chapter6: Literacy Meta-Discourse.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> http://www.adulterc.org/

Ultimately, definitions are about positioning. Positioning theory developed by Rom Harré and Luk van Langenhove (1999) sees language and action affecting interactions, and they define positioning as "the discursive construction of personal stories that make a person's actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts and within which members of the conversation have specific locations" (p. 16). While roles may be fixed or stable, people can change positions or be positioned in multiple ways as they speak about themselves and others. Those who get to say what counts as literacy for adults and how it is measured or assessed are able to determine how adult learners are positioned or represented. As Knoblauch observes, "definitions only tell what some person or group—motivated by political commitments—wants or needs literacy to be" (p. 204-05). If definition-making is only done by sponsors, even with the best of intentions, adult learners have limited agency in their literacy development. If decisionmaking is placed fully in the hands of adult learners, they are positioned as experts, but their lack of experience and exposure may lead them to make choices that hamper rather than facilitate their literacy development. Lack of access to negotiation and decisionmaking as well as capricious access to them both may result in frustration and failure.

## **Sponsors in Control: Assessing Adult Literacy**

Sponsors have maintained tight control over the negotiation of meaning and delivery of adult literacy through policies, laws, programs, and behaviors. For example, immigrants have been denied access to the country based on a particular definition of literacy,<sup>22</sup> and adults seeking welfare have been forced to join programs that endorse particular definitions.<sup>23</sup> Sometimes the definitions of literacy that sponsors use have not been articulated, even while they have been establishing legislation. For example, the Adult Basic Education Act of 1966 did not include a definition of literacy, and the federal government did not add a definition to any of its amendments. To assume meaning

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> The 1917 Immigration Act was passed by the United States Congress even though President Woodrow Wilson had vetoed it. The Act included a literacy test and it denied entry to "All aliens over sixteen years of age, physically capable of reading, who can not read the English language, or some other language or dialect, including Hebrew or Yiddish." For this Act, literacy was defined as reading.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Some welfare programs make enrollment in educational activities a requirement in order to qualify for support. For example, in 1995, Delaware approved A Better Chance (ABC), a program that requires recipients to participate in educational programs and imposes sanctions if they do not meet education requirements.

increases control over a term by making it difficult for anyone to challenge an unexpressed understanding. Not defining a term can also lead people to believe that they share a common understanding, and so no dialogue is necessary.

Most often, however, sponsors like the federal government, choose to define key terms explicitly, suggesting that defining establishes a common starting point for strategizing, and this belief has some legitimacy. For example, The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 includes the following: "The term 'literacy' means an individual's ability to read, write, and speak in English, compute, and solve problems, at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job, in the family of the individual, and in society" (Section 203, p.127).<sup>24</sup> Without deliberate articulation of the focus on English, one could misunderstand that the Act sought to work with literacy in multiple languages. Recording a definition allows sponsors to target the abilities named and create assessments based on those definitions, but it is still can be interpreted as an attempt to manage the meaning of literacy.

Sponsor dominance over literacy is most clearly evident in official literacy assessment. Because literacy instruction must be funded, and sponsors expect remuneration for their investment, adult literacy programs are assessed for initial approval, to determine if they target sponsors' goals like certification or employment. Not only are programs evaluated to see if they meet funding criteria, but sponsors continue assessment to ensure that their ventures are profitable. Progress and profit are established through quantitative measures such as increased reading levels, completed certification, and improved attendance. The relationship between literacy and assessment becomes blurred as each informs the other. If sponsors agree upon a definition for literacy, then they can create assessments that are based on that definition. For example, if reading at a ninth grade level is the definition of *literate*, and the GED passing level is the ninth grade level, then possessing a GED means one is literate.<sup>25</sup> However, once assessments are in place, they can become definitions themselves, replacing and reshaping earlier

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> The term *literacy* is not defined earlier in the Act, even though it is used throughout the document. This allows for readers to define *literacy* for themselves for over 100 pages.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> This was the assumption made in reference to high school diplomas until people began to challenge the link between graduation and literacy.

understandings of literacy as some gain greater prominence over others. Definitions and assessments thus become conflated.

For example, Barton (2007) discusses the ways that reading has become equated with its assessment. He writes,

The skills view of reading is closely tied in with the need to assess. Schools are required to be able to sort, grade, test, and evaluate. . . . In North America . . . reading grades are defined in terms of the needs of testing. The only definition of grades when one gets beyond the earliest grades, in terms of external reference, is that grades refer to what a child in a particular classroom is expected to achieve. In the later grades, and probably the earlier ones too, the levels are not measuring the narrow view of reading they purport to, but the practices of schooling, including vocabulary, general knowledge and ways of meaning. (p. 164)

Because sponsors view literacy in a particular way, as a set of skills, they are able to construct assessment and design instruction that match their definition of reading. They do not create assessment just to monitor and describe reading skills but to determine what is or is not acceptable.

Sponsors, such as the Educational Testing Services (ETS) and the Department of Education, use a variety of approaches when constructing the measures that determine what counts as acceptable literacy. In "Defining Literacy: Paradise, Nightmare or Red Herring?" Peter Roberts (1995), an education scholar from the University of Auckland, describes three general approaches to assessment that have had consequences for defining literacy: quantitative, qualitative, and pluralist. Quantitative approaches are those based on years of schooling or reading ages, and they are problematic because they ignore variety across nations, regions, and communities (p. 414-15). Qualitative approaches focus "on describing in a more general way the 'features' or 'dimensions' of literacy and the literate person," moving away from rates and levels (p. 418). Qualitative definitions can be prescriptive, but even if they are not, creating assessments for them can be tricky since there is no clear universal standard. Finally, pluralistic approaches move away from defining literacy as a single thing and instead focus on literacies. In *Literacy in Theory and Practice*, Brian Street (1984), who popularized the term *literacies*, states that

"literacy is the uses to which it is put and the conceptions which shape and reflect its actual use" (p. 50). Defining literacy in this way makes assessment difficult because the meaning of literacy is bound to the context in which it is used and does not have universal application or translation. Governments, scholars, and private institutions have wrestled and continue to wrestle with definitions and assessments of literacy in the hopes of making it more manageable (Roberts, 1995, p. 416).

Assessment performed by sponsors often relies on a very different understanding of literacy than practice-centered definitions. Conceptualizing literacy as something universal, without nuance and a need for contextual interpretation, allows sponsors to define literacy independent of the views and circumstances of adult learners. With this understanding of literacy, adult learners' thoughts about literacy are irrelevant, and they are removed from the discussion, except as suppliers of information (e.g. the number of years of schooling completed) that sponsors can use to determine whether or not they qualify as literate.

Historically, sponsors have relied on quantitative measures for assessing and defining *literacy* and for labeling adults as *literate* or *illiterate*. In "The Rise of the Adult Education and Literacy System in the United States: 1600-2000," Sticht (2002) points out when the definition of literacy is restricted, assessment practices are also limited: "In most studies of the history of literacy in the early United States, the term *literacy* has been more or less understood as the ability to read or write. Studies of the prevalence of literacy among adults during Colonial and Revolutionary times have used indicators such as signatures on wills, marriage licenses, military records, or other legal documents to infer the prevalence of literacy" (vol. 3, ch. 2). Searching documents for signatures does not require active input from adults. They are effectively removed from having any participation in negotiating the meaning of literacy.

With the advent of government censuses, two additional factors came to affect the meaning of literacy. First, adults were asked to confirm their literacy based on the government's definition. Cook (1977) reports that in 1900 the U. S. Census asked people 10 years of age or older if they could read and write in their native language (p. 14). A simple *yes* or *no* response to a question could earn one the label of *literate* or *illiterate*. Second, grade level completion became conflated with literacy. In 1947, questions about

literacy were dropped, and people were instead asked to give the highest grade in school they had completed (p. 62). Persons with fewer than five years of schooling were illiterate; those with five years or more were literate. When census takers ask adults about grade level completion, memory and honesty are the only required contributions from adults. They do not have to assess and contribute to meaning; they only need to report. Meaning-making is still out of their hands.

The practice of using simplified methods to define and measure literacy focusing on just reading and writing as well as ages or grade levels—continued among major literacy sponsors in the United States throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In *Literacy in America: Historic Journey and Contemporary Solutions*, Edward Gordon and Elaine Gordon (2003) examine the changes in literacy standards from 1900 to the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (p. 274). The following chart (Table 2.1) shows when these measures held sway:

1900:	Able to write your own name
1930s:	Three or more years of schooling
	(Civilian Conservation Corps)
WWII:	Fourth-grade education
	(U.S. Army)
1947:	Five or more years of school
	(Census Bureau)
1952:	Six or more years of school
	(Census Bureau)
1970:	Ninth-grade education
	(U.S. Office of Education)
21 <sup>st</sup> Century:	High-school education plus
	(U.S. Department of Education and the Conference Board)

Table 2.1: What Does It Mean to Be a 'Literate Person' in America?

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many sponsors relied on quantitative measures based on understandings of literacy as something unified and consistent across contexts. The

Army, Census Bureau, and Department of Education all used measurements that did not account for the individuality of the adult learner.

Well-meaning sponsors, directed by and including the federal government, have omitted adult learners from the activity of meaning-making for a very long time. While the assessment of literacy in the 1800s and early 1900s reflects a concentration on literacy as some discrete achievement, able to be measured with straightforward and accurate quantitative methods, sponsors in the 20<sup>th</sup> century have continued to do the same by focusing on binaries and by constructing literacy as something universal and generic. Adults are not brought into the process because sponsors do not think they need to be involved. After all, if literacy is just one practice, such as reading (and reading is seen as a simple skill), then it can be defined without the adult learners. Additionally, if sponsors see adults as illiterate, they may also see them as incapable of defining what it means to be literate, believing that one must be literate in order to know the full meaning of literacy.

### **Learners in Control**

Some sponsors, however, have not rejected adult learner understandings of literacy. Adult learner input has shaped some adult literacy programs, but the movements that have proposed and attempted initiatives based on radical empowerment have had problems. A radical shift in the 1960s and 1970s moved adult learners from an incidental position to one of central importance in terms of their contribution to the meaning of literacy. Some sponsors began challenging this notion, acknowledging levels of proficiency, practices other than those connected with reading and writing, and the relevance of context to meaning. Attention turned to what the adult's role in literacy learning might be, sometimes in radical ways. For example, in *Adult Illiteracy in the United States: A Report to the Ford Foundation*, which brought increased attention to adult literacy issues in 1979, Carman St. John Hunter and David Harman suggest that adult learners should define literacy for themselves. This was a move away from sponsor-generated definitions and set up adult learners as the agents of literacy learning. Hunter and Harman emphasize the decision-making power of the adults who choose based on what *they* think they need, moving away from an essential notion of literacy to definitions

that "are relative to time and space" (p. 12). To know what literacy is requires the adults' input; in fact, the adult is privileged in this paradigm.

Having adult learners in charge of defining literacy is a radical shift from other models in which sponsors hold full control. According to Lytle (1991), this shift is built on ideas by those who argue that "practices differ from group to group within a society as well as from society to society" (p. 381). Similarly, Brian Street (1993) explains that researchers "have come to view literacy practices as inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in society and to recognize the variety of cultural practices associated with reading and writing in different contexts" (p. 433-34). If the cultural context is of utmost importance, the adult learner is the expert, not the sponsor whose experiences are often from outside the communities of adult learners.

Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator, is perhaps best known for his privileging of the adult learner in the decision-making process of literacy. Freire insisted on empowering the learner, and moving away from the conventional rigid roles of teacher and student. He argued that teachers should be learners and learners should be teachers, disrupting the model that suggests a parent-child or a colonizer-colonized relationship. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) writes, "Only insofar as learners become thinking subjects, and recognize that they are as much thinking subjects as are the teachers, is it possible for the learners to become productive subjects of the meaning or knowledge of the object" (p. 90). Literacy should not be defined for learners by teachers (or sponsors); instead, adult literacy should be "constituted and organized by the students' view of the world" (p. 101). Learners should be taught using a critical pedagogy that makes them into agents, capable of determining their own destinies.

Freire's critical, liberation-driven, and participatory approach to adult literacy continues to be embraced in the academy and in some internationally sponsored initiatives. For example, in "A Post-Freirean Model for Adult Literacy Education," Michael Holzman (1988) echoes Freire's thinking about the role of adult learners in literacy learning. Holzman does not see literacy efforts beginning with sponsors but with local adult populations. He recounts his experiences with the Maryknoll Sisters and their work with adult literacy. One nun remembers her literacy work in which "all the goalsetting was done by the local women themselves" (p. 184). When describing their work,

the Maryknoll Sisters say "they wish to 'accompany' members of local communities who are engaged in attempting to improve their own lives" (p. 187). To accompany adult learners positions sponsors as supporters of adult decision-making.

Holzman argues for literacy learning that originates with the adults themselves. He writes,

> This preferred technique for literacy education today is that of selfinstruction by small groups of people voluntarily assembled, assisted by representatives of intermediary organizations as necessary, but always in such a way that the mode of education furthers the end, that is, selfreliance and improved living conditions visibly achieved through the efforts of the people themselves.... People value what they themselves have achieved. (p. 187)

The adult learners are to have major responsibility for the way literacy is imagined and pursued. Sponsors are only to assist when "necessary," removing primary definition-making authority from the sponsor. They are consulted for their expertise, but only as long as it allows the adults to maintain self-reliance. The defining of literacy is not a cooperative act, but rather one in the hands of the adults.

A similar radical view that puts the adult learner in the position of meaning-maker is in the work of Alan Rogers (2000), who studied literacy practices of women in Nepal. In "Literacy Comes Second: Working with Groups in Developing Societies," Rogers argues that forcing literacy on adults, using definitions and programs authored by the sponsors, is unproductive. It models a school-based approach to learning: to "learn literacy first, and then engage in some form of developmental activity" (p. 237). He describes a scene from India with 25 women attending a two-hour session:

Most of the time is spent by the learners working individually on the textbook (the literacy primer) exercises, the rest on discussion of some common matter (not every group has this discussion element, but virtually every group is intended to have it). They are all working on the same page, at the same point—there is little difference between all the learners during the class. Many of them leave the primer (and sometimes even their own exercise books) at the class centre, others take them home until the next

meeting. From time to time, a supervisor comes from the NGO or government agency providing the literacy class—to check up on the attendance or the teaching of the instructor, just like a school inspector. At the end of the nine months (or whatever length of time is set for the programme), the participants are invited to sit a test to see if they have become 'literate'. (p. 236)

This group's activities follow the sponsor's notions about literacy, providing a regimented program that leads to acquisition of some set of skills called *literacy*. The label is determined by a sponsor-oriented and sponsor-administered test that learners are "invited" to take. Rogers' critique is clearly focused on the adults' lack of agency in the pursuit of literacy.

Rogers proposes using a "literacy comes second" model for adult literacy programs. First, groups should be natural, that is, sponsors should "work with groups which already exist in the community" (p. 237). Second, the groups should be mixed in terms of literate abilities so that people are not made to feel inferior; rather, each member should be valued for what he or she brings. The adults would request literacy training, based on their perceived needs (p. 238). Finally, groups would focus on real tasks, not artificial ones found in textbooks. This is suited for adults: "The justification for this approach comes from adult learning theory, which says that adults (as distinct from children) learn best through doing things in their own lives for real—that they learn cooking by (real) cooking, they learn farming by (real) farming, they learn parenting by parenting, they learn literacy skills by using literacy for real" (p. 238). The importance of the real issues will create success. Any imposed understanding of literacy, by implication, is false and unsuited for adult learners.

While Rogers' discussion includes many factors relating to motivation and the selection of instructional material, at the core of his argument is that adults should have the dominant say in negotiating the definition of literacy. In a radical way, the adult learners determine their learning, deciding on what is best for them in their context. Sponsors of these groups are concerned with supporting rather than initiating groups and seek to "to help the group to improve on all its skills, including its literacy skills" (p.

239). The sponsor takes a subordinate role in establishing the meaning and value of literacy.

This approach may have shortcomings when the adult learners are seeking access to power structures outside of their limited experiences within their local communities. Developing nations often remain disadvantaged because they lack exposure to the technologies and advances that are in the hands of empowered outsiders. Likewise, adult learners in the United States might make decisions concerning their literacy needs based on myopic understandings of their local situation rather than an expansive understanding of their lives in a wider, perhaps global, context. While respecting and affirming an individual's understanding of literacy is empowering, endorsing or ignoring patterns that contribute to marginalization is not. Adult learners who only know of two choices are not empowered in the same way as those who have been shown a dozen options by sponsors.

### **Defining Literacy on Behalf of Adults**

Sponsors find themselves grappling with conflicting understandings of literacy as various authorities push their agendas. According to Catherine Prendergast (2003) in *Literacy and Racial Justice: The Politics of Learning after Brown v. Board of Education*, defining literacy has "move[d] toward a conception of culturally situated, shifting and multiple 'literacies' and away from a single, normative literacy, even while state and federal legislatures in adopting standardized testing pursue the opposite course" (p. 9). While most scholars admit that literacy is no longer just a single entity but is something multiple and varied, programs must wrestle with accountability to the adult learners and other sponsors.

Some sponsors have defined literacy without any input from adult learners; others have argued that dominant decision-making authority should be with adult learners. Still other sponsors have sought to define literacy on behalf of the adult learner. This maneuver differs from efforts that disembody literacy/illiteracy from the adult learner, discussing literacy as some detached concept that can be nourished apart from the individual learner's life. It also differs from the practice of having adult learners make their choices based solely on their own knowledge and experience. Instead, some defining practices seek to speak for the adult, providing definitions that suggest what

adults need. Sponsors sometimes find themselves defining literacy in the best interests of the learners who seek it, not solely for the sake of the community, state, or country, but also for the adult learner. Just as *in loco parentis* allows for schools and institutions to act on behalf of parents for the welfare of minors, some sponsors seek to do what they think is best for adults. It is a benevolent gesture, but one that still does not fully engage the adult learner's understanding of literacy.

For example, The National Literacy Act of 1991 set out to tackle illiteracy by establishing the National Institute for Literacy which would "enhance the national effort to eliminate the problem of illiteracy by the year 2000 by improving research, development and information dissemination through a national research center" (*NIFL Report on Activities and Accomplishments*, p. 52). This statement immediately reveals the understanding of literacy in relationship to its binary, *illiteracy*. Illiteracy is labeled a "problem." This suggests that literacy is a positive possession, something that can replace illiteracy. The term "eliminate" suggests that illiteracy is something negative, perhaps like a threat or a disease, not to be endured or tolerated, but destroyed or removed. It is a "national effort," one that needs national attention because, presumably, it is a very serious problem. The focus is on *illiteracy/literacy*, not the person, and by using a binary, the learner is left out of the picture.

The definition of *literacy* included in The National Literacy Act of 1991, however, moves away from treating adults as incidental. The act states "For purposes of this Act the term 'literacy' means an individual's ability to read, write, and speak in English, and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one's goals, and develop one's knowledge and potential" (Irwin, 1991, p. 52). The definition is clearly skills-based, naming five abilities: reading, writing, speaking, computing, and solving problems. The final two abilities seem intended to target number-based or quantitative areas, although the definition does not make this explicit. This definition names a specific language— English—and connects the skills with the person, making literacy an individualistic competency. The emphasis is on "function" or functional literacy.

This definition is different from conventional definitions because it acknowledges that literacy will not be the same for everyone, for the goals, occupations, and potentials

may vary greatly from person to person. It recognizes the varieties of adult learners. This focus on the person, however, is articulated after two other considerations: "function on the job and in society." Whether or not this is in order of decreasing importance in the definition is unclear. Also, the kinds of jobs and the kind of society are not specified. Finally, the terms "read, write, and speak" are not expanded. For example, writing might suggest taking dictation, writing creatively, note-taking, or any number of other practices. What is clear in this definition is that the sponsor is articulating more carefully the role that it perceives adults have in literacy, in particular, in the ways they use it.

This move toward more descriptive and developed definitions can be found in the work of other sponsors. The 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL), which is sponsored by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), "is a nationally representative assessment of English literacy among American adults age 16 and older" (NAAL).<sup>26</sup> It divides the term into two main parts: task-based and skills-based literacy. The former is "the ability to use printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential," while the latter states that "Successful use of printed material is a product of two classes of skills: [w]ord-level reading skills [and] [h]igher level literacy skills" (NAAL). This definition emphasizes abilities in relation to printed and written text, recognizing a difference in the representations of language and the skills needed to understand them. Because the assessment does not operate with a single definition, the term *literacy* lacks easy grasp, but the matter is complicated further because NAAL also includes subcategories of literacy: prose, document, and quantitative. Prose literacy is "knowledge and skills needed to perform prose tasks, (i.e., to search, comprehend, and use continuous texts)." Document literacy is "knowledge and skills needed to perform document tasks, (i.e., to search, comprehend, and use non-continuous texts in various formats)." Quantitative literacy is "knowledge and skills required to perform quantitative tasks, (i.e., to identify and perform computations, either alone or sequentially, using numbers embedded in printed materials)" (NAAL).

NAAL provides a definition with combined orientations. The former task-based part of the definition resembles the definition of The National Literacy Act, and the latter

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> http://nces.ed.gov/NAAL/index.asp?file=AboutNAAL/WhatIsNAAL.asp&PageId=2

skills-based portion of the definition expands the contexts in which adults might find themselves using literacy. Again, while society's concerns are listed before the individual's, the goals, knowledge, and potential of the adult learner are included. The definitions assume the categories that adult learners possess and then seek to measure them. The list is longer than the generic categories of reading and writing, giving greater attention to the variety of abilities and practices that adults may have, but the verb "use" in the first half of the definition does not clarify what is involved in using printed and written information. The definition seeks to cover all the bases so that no adult learner is overlooked.

Defining literacy on behalf of adult learners treats them as subjects or passive recipients, not active participants in the process. Studying adults more carefully using context to expand the possible meanings of literacy has provided sponsors with definitions that link literacy more closely with adult learners. Their goals, knowledge, and roles are taken into account, but adults are often treated as children in schools. They walk into programs where meaning has already been fixed and permanent curricula have been developed based on those definitions. More adults might find satisfaction in this system than in one that treats them as incidental, but many still will find themselves partially represented by the well-intentioned sponsors.

## What Adult Learners Have to Say

Although sponsors have given significant attention to adult literacy, little has been studied about the understandings of literacy that adult learners have and how they come to those understandings. For example, a survey of reading research from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century through the 1960s shows a surprisingly slim body of studies that gives attention to adults who are not already literate. Venezky and Sabatini (2002) comment, "Interest in the basic perceptual and cognitive processes of adults learning to read is a phenomenon of the last 3 decades, with few sustained research programs, few standardized measures, and limited agreement on how to define experimental populations" (p. 217). The research is especially thin when it comes to adult learners' definitions of literacy within adult literacy programs. The research and commentary have focused mainly on the ideas that

adults have about literacy, learning, and education in non-programmatic environments. What the research offers is a mixture of understandings drawn from a number of places.

Adult literacy learners do not develop their understandings and expectations of literacy from the latest educational journal or graduate seminars. They draw their understandings from their communities and their experiences. Grabill (2001) argues that "nearly all literate activity takes place within or with reference to specific social institutions, and any attempt to understand literate practices without understanding the institutions that make certain practices possible and valuable fails to account for how and why literate practices look the way they do" (p. 7). Social institutions include schools, churches, charity groups, lodges, and so on. Schools, however, hold powerful sway over literacy understandings. Barton, Hamilton, and Padmore (1992) state that many people "find it hard to articulate their theories of literacy except in relation to schooling" (p.7). This does not mean that adults have not developed understandings of literacy, adults rely on the ways that literacy has been represented in schools.

Not all adult learners have participated in schooling, but most have had some years in compulsory schooling. Barton (2007) points out that "The most common views of literacy start out from the educational settings in which literacy is typically taught, that is, the school classroom. The dominant definitions in society, then, are school based definitions of literacy. These views of what literacy is are often at odds with what people experience in their everyday lives" (p. 4). Their dominant views focus on reading and writing of a particular kind associated with certain kinds of instruction. School-based literacy, however, is often not obviously replicated in worlds outside of the institution. The skill of reading electrical schematics is not identical to reading a poem, although more adults would associate literacy with poetry than any more familiar texts such as a subway map, a DVD instructional manual, or a recipe for coconut cake.

Schools not only shape the understandings of literacy that adult literacy learners have because of the time they spent in school, but schools also shape the views of the general public. As adult learners move through their world, they encounter people, events, and objects that suggest particular definitions of literacy. Barton (2007) argues that two dominant public views exist: reading is a set of skills and writers are scribes and

authors (p. 161). First, schools have taught people that reading develops in distinct stages and is an individual act. Therefore, an adult who reads with the help of someone else is not really reading. Second, writing is thought of as either handwriting or composition. The public view privileges essay writing as a literate activity, but ignores note-taking or filling in forms as literacy (p. 168). These views, closely connected with school-based education, shape the ways that adult learners think about literacy.

Schools also have been able to affect the values people give to particular kinds of literacy. Certain reading and writing practices have become more respected than others. Barton (2007) comments that the terms *literary* and *literate* share an etymology but have important distinctions in social circles: "Literacy and literary have grown apart in an almost deliberate distancing of elite culture and mass culture" (p. 167). In *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, John Carey (1992) argues that this separation was fostered deliberately by a host of modern writers, anxious to keep the working classes separate from the intelligentsia. Whether or not this is the source of the division does not matter; according to Barton, "Like the other metaphors for literacy, it [the literary view of literacy] also pervades everyday views of reading and writing; it does not necessarily originate in schools but it is nourished and supported by the institution of schooling" (p. 167). Literature and book literacy receive a higher status than other forms of reading and writing, and many adult learners have accepted and use this distinction when evaluating their literacy.

At times, sponsors have clearly articulated this distinction between literary literacy and more popular forms of literacy with the express purpose of promoting one kind of literacy over another. These views reach other sponsors and have the potential of influencing the public. A prominent example is *Reading at Risk* (2004), a report produced by the National Endowment for the Arts. Its hyperbolic preface states, "Literary reading in America is not only declining rapidly among all groups, but the rate of decline has accelerated, especially among the young. The concerned citizen in search of good news about American literary culture will study the pages of this report in vain" (p. vii). The writers of the study do not find comfort in the increase in the use of electronic media but prefer to offer a panicked assessment. Their anxiety is rooted in the belief that "active and engaged readers lead richer intellectual lives than non-readers and that a well-read

citizenry is essential to a vibrant democracy" (p. ix). This report was a topic of much debate among librarians, educators, politicians, media services, and other sponsors and presumably spread to the general public, including adult learners.

Adult learners come to rely on these sponsor-influenced understandings of literacy, often ignoring the evidence of successful literacy practices within their own lives. Those who are unable to write a long narrative (as English classes require) or who do not keep a journal (as published writers often do) may say that they do not or cannot write because that is what they associate with being literate. Those who do not possess a library card or have a shelf of books in their home may believe they do not read. Adults who read and send text messages, use maps and road signs to navigate the highways, browse and maintain social networking pages, and create and revise shopping or birthday lists may believe that they cannot read or write because these practices do not resemble the academic-oriented literacy practices they failed to master in schools.

The majority of information about adult learners' understandings of literacy comes from small studies conducted by academic scholars and theorists, not from dominant sponsors like the federal government. The research is often ethnographic in nature, focusing on a few learners intensely (Fingeret & Drennon, 1997; Purcell-Gates, 1995). These studies suggest that adults rely on particular sponsor-influenced definitions of literacy, at times acknowledging the ways that those definitions conflict with their own understandings.

In "Giving Meaning to Literacy: Intergenerational Beliefs about Access" Vivian Gadsden (1992) explores some of the understandings of literacy she discovered from her work with 25 senior Black men and women in rural South Carolina. She learns that the adults, who shared a community and a historical period, think about literacy in very different ways. For example, Miz Lennie, who is 82 years old, reflects on her younger days and the notions held by the community. She states,

I guess that if people ever really thought about the term, literacy, they would probably define it as reading and writing. . . So if you want to know how I would define literacy as a Black person, you could say it's reading or you could call it writing or knowing how to survive in this world. But, you know, most of all it was knowing how to combine all of these things

so that you appreciate who you are as a Black person and so you never forget your history. (p. 328)

Miz Lennie offers no single definition of literacy but moves from traditional definitions of literacy as the mastery of two skills—reading and writing—to less tangible notions of survival and identity. Her focus on survival might suggest the functional definition endorsed by many sponsors. She locates her definition of literacy in her identity as a Black person but offers multiple meanings before selecting all of the meanings as her definition. She reflects the definitions of the early and later 1900s, attempting to synthesize them, and finds that literacy can mean many things that lead to a stronger sense of self. This view does not resemble the more prominent views of sponsors.

Mr. Lem, an 87-year old, has a different way thinking about literacy. In fact, he never uses the term *literacy*, but he focuses on its gloss *education*:

Reading and writing gave a person a high status in the community. I wanted for my children what I couldn't and didn't get myself—an education. . . It was hard to tell your children honestly that reading and writing would make things better. But we told them that anyway because reading and writing—an education—well, nobody can take it away from you . . . nothing is more important than book learning. (p. 328)

Mr. Lem conflates literacy with education (as do many sponsors), primarily mastering reading and writing, but sees it as a very empowering entity. Education was connected with "high status," one's position within the community. He fosters the belief that literacy would improve one's life, and that it was of supreme importance, all the while doubting whether this was true. He also emphasizes the literary aspect of literacy with "book learning."

Miz Lennie and Mr. Lem had differing understandings of literacy. While Gadsden's study does not suggest why these two participants had such different views, it clearly shows that definitions are not identical among adult learners, even within the same community. They both valued literacy and education, but Miz Lennie saw multiple possibilities and expansive meanings, while Mr. Lem was able to limit his definition to "book learning." This suggests that one cannot assume the definitions that adults hold

when they come to adult literacy programs, even if members are drawn from a small and tightly-knit community.

Adults attach different values to literacy which influences their behaviors. Deborah Brandt (2001), in her work *Literacy in American Lives*, collects the responses of eighty Americans (reduced to fifty-four for the study) who were born between 1895 and 1985 and living in south central Wisconsin (pp. 3, 14). She examines literacy learning, literacy development, and literacy opportunity across generations and within particular groups, such as the African American community, but nowhere in her book does she directly address the definitions that the adults hold regarding literacy. What she does describe thoroughly is the values held by the participants, and these values often provide insight into their understandings of literacy. For example, Ames is an African American who was born in a rural community in 1950 (p. 58). In eighth grade, he was still not able to read and write and dropped out of school before joining the Jobs Corp program sponsored by the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. He was later convicted of a capital offense and sent to prison for life where he learned to read and write in a formal program that would earn him an associate's degree in legal assistance (p. 63). Brandt summarizes his views on literacy:

Ames said that he continued to go through "great pains" as a result of the gaps in his formal education. "Some things are hard for me to grasp," he said, "but once I grasp something, I got it. So some people can read something once or twice. Maybe I'll have to read it three or four or five times. But I know the value of rereading it four or five times." Reflecting on his literacy development, Ames said that reading and writing gave him a "chance to evaluate what is valuable and what is not. I wouldn't have been able to make those determinations in my life without reading and writing." (p. 64)

For Ames, developing his literacy was no easy task, and the abilities that he possesses still make reading a chore, but reading and writing have shaped his life. Literacy is a resource that helped him to take control of his life and helped him to appeal and overturn his original conviction (p. 63). Literacy, for him, was not a luxury, but something essential to survival.

But the ways that Ames valued reading and writing were not shared by all the participants. In fact, many of them recall being met with indifference and resistance in relation to developing writing practices. For example, Benjamin Lucas, who was born in 1936, did not receive any positive reinforcement in relation to writing. He remembers

Not only did I not get encouragement at home but I got a lot of discouragement because this was something that was so totally an anathema to [my family]. First, they didn't understand it, but what they thought they understood about it was something they identified with poverty and wastefulness. (p. 158)

Literacy as a valuable resource did not need to include writing. In fact, it ran counter to the literacy myth and was associated with lack of success. Brandt summarizes that "On the whole, it must be said that the status of writing in everyday literacy practices appeared decidedly more ambiguous and conflicted in comparison to reading" (p. 160). This definition of literacy resembles understandings hundreds of years old, when literacy did not necessarily include writing. It also resembles the emphasis of several late 20<sup>th</sup> century reading campaigns in the United States and around the world when sponsors targeted reading, not writing.

The contrast here shows that writing can be left outside the definition of literacy, making the definitions of literacy complex and varied. This will have consequences for programs that emphasize literacy practices that adult learners may not desire. A program that links reading and writing, seeing them as parts of a whole, may meet resistance from those who see writing as an embellishment rather than a substantial component of literacy. Assuming a shared definition of literacy, instead of participating in discussion and negotiation, may result in avoidable frustration for both adult learners and sponsors.

Frustration, however, need not be the result of differing understandings of literacy. Grabill (2001) writes about two adult learners that attended the GED classes at the Western District site in his study. This couple attended a GED course without intending to seek new employment or to become GED certified (p. 113). Selden and Gertrude were in their late 50s and came to the program to learn how to read, but the two of them had very different ideas of what that meant. Selden had worked in machine shops and could use blueprints effectively, but he said that he could not read and wanted to

learn how to read in order to acquire and use a computer (p. 112). Gertrude wanted to be able to read novels and said,

I always looked at books, and just looked at them and I'd think some of these days I can read this when I was . . . and I said I'll be able to read this again. So I always loved to read, 'cause reading always, I've always just . . . . you read that and you just transfer you to someplace else, you know, or different people and different times, different things. Maybe you can't go there but you can read about it, and that way you, so you get to go there by reading. (p. 112)

Gertrude had a literary understanding of literacy, that it involved novels and vicarious experiences. She had the sense that she had lost her ability to read this kind of writing. They both had understandings of literacy informed by sponsor definitions, but they were happily participating in a program with goals different from their own.

The ways that sponsors of programs instruct learners suggest their definitions of literacy, and learners pick up on these understandings. Fingeret & Drennon (1997) studied five adult learners in a New York adult literacy program and comment on the ways that sponsors shape learner understandings. For example, Ann comes to understand reading as the ability to know all words:

Ann measures her need for learning in terms of words. There are words she knows, and words she doesn't know. She speaks of words that others know, and of words she needs to know. To Ann, reading is recognizing individual words and knowing how to spell them without having to ask for help. . . Ann will know that she has reached the end of her studies when she can read the newspaper headline—not because this is necessarily a personal goal she set for herself, but because she has somehow gotten the idea that the program requires all students to read the newspaper before they leave the program. (p. 37)

Ann has narrowed her definition of reading to knowing and pronouncing words in a sequence from start to finish. The activity of newspaper reading used by the sponsors has further influenced her understanding to believe that full literacy equals competent newspaper reading.

The influence of the program on learner understandings is also evident in *Other People's Words: The Cycle of Low Literacy*, in which Victoria Purcell-Gates (1995) explores the literacy learning of a white, urban Appalachian family. Jenny, the mother, is attending a community based adult school in order to learn how to read. She confesses that she could not "read a lick" at first (p. 51). After joining the program, she learns to read certain words in her workbook:

Well, I can read 'em now. O.K., like *father*, I couldn't read that for the longest time. And I had a paper. The words that was hard for me that I didn't know? I had 'em written down. And then when I would go to it, somehow I would remember it by looking at this paper, in the way I had 'em written down. And then I'd just go on. (p. 68)

Jenny has come to understand reading as word recognition and pronunciation. Purcell-Gates believes that her decoding definition is the result of traditional skills-based reading instruction which assumes that "one first learns to read (a period assigned to the kindergarten through third grade) and then reads to learn (from fourth grade on up. Learning to write is viewed as a separate process, made up of its own component discrete skills" (p. 69). The program sponsors have an understanding of literacy that impacts instruction and ultimately affects the ways that learners understand literacy.

Adult learners' understandings of literacy are intricately connected with their expectations of literacy and their programs. For example, in "Policy and Practice in Adult Learning: A Case Study Perspective" by Richard Venezky, John Sabatini, Christine Brooks, and Christine Carino (1996), the authors report on three case studies of adult learners from northern Delaware. They assess the participation and progress of each of the learners and examine how these might relate to policy. They make their intentions clear:

> If there is a principle that has guided the development of these written cases, then it is one that derives from a diagnostic and remediation instruction model, and a learning context in which instructional goals are the central focus. By concentrating on these aspects, we do not mean to ignore the importance of issues like student anxiety, attributions, selfconfidence, and motivation. . .but we do not see them as the goals of adult

basic education. . . There should be little satisfaction, therefore, in a situation where, after a year or more of instruction, the only tangible change is a purported increase in self-confidence by the learner or a more positive attitude toward literacy. (p. 3)

Their approach to ABE is to look for "tangible change," that is, measurable improvement in reading and writing skills, and the ability to secure diplomas. Their focus is on instruction which, in some ways, suggests a central focus apart from the learning and learners.

The result is an odd study that outlines the cases of Ms. A, Ms. B, and Ms. C without recording very many of their words even as the researchers try to determine why the attempts at meeting the learners' goals have not been successful. The understandings of the learners surface accidentally but are not considered a significant part of the picture. Ms. C, for example, enrolls in her GED program "because of a recent state mandate for educational training as a condition for public assistance and food stamps" (p. 9). Perhaps she struggles with the course because she does not value the literacy that is being offered, or rather, forced upon her. The researchers suggest that better diagnostic information about her literacy levels in high school would have enabled better responses to her situation. Ms. B reveals her personal understanding of literacy when she writes "I don't care about my grade, I care about getting it into my head" (p. 8). The authors, however, are more interested in her standardized test scores than in what is driving her efforts.

This is not to say that every study must answer all questions and exhaust all possibilities, but study by Venezky et al. (1996) is fairly typical of the research on adult learners. They are seen as subjects, things to be studied, rather than participants in the literacy program who have a say in how things get done. In fact, Venezky et al. (1996) comment that "allowing each student to set his or her own instructional goals is a democratic approach to adult education, but it is not an effective way to use limited instructional resources" (p. 15). They resist adult agency, at least of this type, and if one substitutes the words "definition of literacy" for "instructional goals," one might begin to get a clearer understanding of the disempowerment adults experience in programs that are not focused on their needs from their perspectives.

# Conclusion

Clearly, adult learners do have understandings of literacy. Sponsors, however, often do not elicit their understandings upon entering programs, and there is little evidence of regular dialogue between learners and sponsors about the meaning of literacy. Lack of dialogue has potentially serious consequences for participation. Lytle (1991) observes that learners often have goals that do not match those of the programs they join, so learners may drop out "when asked to repeat patterns of instruction associated with previous failures to learn, and still others drop out if the program varies too radically from their school based expectations" (p. 396). She argues, "It is time to question prevailing assumptions about the capabilities and lifestyles of the less-than-literate adult, unpacking conflicting conceptions of literacy, and exploring what adult learners count as learning, both in and out of formal educational contexts" (p. 378). The usual ways of defining literacy are ready to be challenged.

More work is needed with definitions, but not the work of the past. Having sponsors work hard at defining literacy, writing thick definitions that explain their side of the story, leaves adult learners out of the negotiation of meaning. Giving full responsibility for defining literacy to adult learners can be overwhelming or unproductive, assuming adults can automatically overcome the limitations that have been placed upon them by history and circumstance. Having sponsors speak on behalf of learners, like ventriloquists speaking for their puppets, does not expand the conversation. Effective adult literacy dialogue requires deliberate and frequent conversations about meaning, between adult learners and sponsors.

In the chapters that follow, I describe my project for increasing the representation of adult learners' understandings and expectations of literacy. By spending time with adult learners and talking with them, I have been able to document their complex lives and thoughts, offering a different representation and account than is typical among sponsors.

# Chapter 3

# Methodology

# Introduction

In the previous chapter, I examined the ways that definitions and definitional practice of literacy for adult literacy programs rely on the efforts of sponsors, with little knowledge of or consideration for learners' understandings and expectations. In this chapter, I describe the ways in which I sought out and obtained learners' thoughts about literacy and adult literacy programs, believing that their understandings and expectations would provide valuable insight into their participation decision-making and behavior. The chapter explains my methodology, the design, evolution, sites, and ethical considerations of this study and the data collection and data analysis procedures. It provides an overview of the research project with two adult literacy programs within Central County in a Midwestern state: the Basic Literacy tutor-learner program at County Literacy and the Adult Adjustments program at Regional Community College.<sup>27</sup> The discussion and description of the adult learners appear in the next chapter.

Through this exploratory, qualitative study I aim to probe deeper than the usual statistically-driven and survey-oriented research, which quantifies adult participation in adult literacy programs by averaging hours and days of attendance, counting certificates earned, or tallying lists of expected responses from sponsor-driven surveys. This project fills a gap left by this kind of research and aligns itself with research efforts that seek more intimate offerings from the adult learners in their own words. In order to amplify the voices of adult learners, I have collected detailed accounts from them through interviews, interactions, and observations in order to offer richer and thicker descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of adult learners' motivations for participation, their understandings of literacy, and their expectations of adult literacy programs. I have also collected program artifacts and detailed accounts from sponsors of adult literacy at the two sites in order to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> I have provided pseudonyms for all research sites, locations, and participants.

examine their role in the conversation, that is, to see how they might influence the expectations and understandings held by adult learners.

### **Evolution of Study Design**

During the research process, three significant developments have reshaped my project. My original plan was to collect substantial data from both learners and sponsors and to use these data to compare the perspectives of those who seek literacy and those who offer it. However, during a re-visiting of the literature review, I began to question this equal distribution of focus as I noticed that the number of studies that gave attention to learners' perspectives and words was small. The sponsor perspective ruled. When learners' needs were considered, these were in service to getting information to sponsors to enable them to fix their programs and manipulate learners into better participation, performance, and outcomes. Learners themselves did not direct change but were subjects that provided evidence for the decision-making of sponsors.

After completing the first few interviews with instructors, I realized I wanted the spotlight on adult learners. While the sponsor perspectives would be extremely useful, especially in providing information that adults did not possess and in confirming responses from learners, I wanted to foreground the words, understandings, and expectations of adults so that they appeared as decisive agents in their own literacy education. I needed to conduct follow-up interviews with learners, not tutors and instructors. Likewise, I wanted to offer rich personal background descriptions for learners but not for sponsors. In short, I decided that the bulk of primary materials from which this study would develop needed to come from learners, so I shifted my attention to them in data collection and analysis.

The second development may seem counter-intuitive to the claim that the study demanded a strong learner focus. My year-long ethnographic case study with one learner was to be a central part of this study. I had envisioned a full chapter on Trisha and her pursuit of literacy, but as I completed learner interviews and tutored Trisha, my perspective changed. First, Trisha's personal life was particularly difficult with issues of divorce, child custody, potential homelessness, and illness. I felt that centralizing her would remove attention from other learners and sensationalize her experience, possibly

unintentionally representing her as a victim or martyr. Second, my experiences with her, though important for providing insider information into the tutor-learner relationship, had the potential of drawing attention away from the learner's perspective and placing it on me and, by extension, tutors and other sponsors. I, therefore, decided to include Trisha's perspective in two forms: directly, alongside other learners, and indirectly in the influences she has had on my writing and thinking. The story of our interactions has been saved for a future project.

Finally, I had assumed that I would take a close look at persistence figures in the research sites and attempt to correlate the statistics with the words of learners. However, I could not pursue this path. The sites had certain kinds of record keeping, but they did not match my original vision and were created for the sake of federal and other financially-contributing sponsors. I could attempt to create my own participation records, but to do so would have meant close monitoring of attendance and tracking of students that I felt would interfere with the work of the programs. Coordinators and counselors already have a difficult time maintaining phone lists and nurturing relationships, and my intrusions had potential to scuttle their work with learners. I have maintained my focus on learners' understandings and expectations of literacy, but I take a descriptive approach to participation, relying on the testimonies and observations of learners and sponsors rather than on quantitative retention and attrition rates.

#### The Role of Ethnography

As indicated in my discussion of the evolution of my study design, the ethnographic component of this research does not occupy a substantial position in the data analysis. However, my ethnographic case study with Trisha, which focused on our relationship as learner and tutor, was key to creating empathy and connection with a group that I had little interaction with prior to this study. As a tutor within the County Literacy program, I gained an emic or insider perspective to complement the etic or outsider perspective I have occupied for the rest of this study.

Anderson-Levitt (2006) points out that ethnographic research is both difficult and useful. It is "time-consuming and unpredictable, and it is inappropriate for straightforward tasks like testing a hypothesis. However, it is an ideal research strategy

for seeking to understand real human behavior in all its complexity and, therefore, provides important background for any research that seeks real and lasting solutions to human problems" (p. 290). Working with Trisha offered me a real opportunity to learn more about the lives of literacy learners, lives unlike my own where I use and teach the literacy practices and skills that they are seeking. Using ethnography also enabled me to recognize those who are disenfranchised and less powerful than others (Anderson-Levitt, 2006, p. 283). I learned much about the considerations, efforts, and struggles of learners through my time with Trisha, and our interactions aided me in conducting interviews effectively, responding to learner behaviors sensitively, and representing learners' experiences empathetically.

## **Summary of Study Design**

This study explores the understandings and expectations of literacy held by a group of adult participants in two adult literacy education programs and how their understandings and expectations might affect the ways they view participation within programs. The study began in January 2009 with an initial investigation of potential research sites that provide adult literacy services within Central County in a mid-western state. I considered eight programs and consulted their administrators before selecting two sites in April 2009: the Basic Literacy tutor-learner program at County Literacy and the Adult Adjustments program at Regional Community College. Administrators granted preliminary written permission for access and cooperation, and I began collecting sponsor-generated artifacts from initial site investigation until August 2010.

In order to participate in the tutor-learner year-long case study, I completed a 15hour training course with County Literacy in June 2009, and the program paired me with a learner in August 2009, beginning the official year-long tutoring contract. This ethnographic case study consisted of weekly two-hour tutoring sessions, lesson preparation, bi-monthly short interviews (less than 15 minutes each), monthly progress reports, and a tutoring journal (combining field notes and reflection).

I conducted interviews for both programs between September 2009 and June 2010. Administrators directly recommended instructors/tutors and staff members, and I completed all sponsor interviews by March 2010. I negotiated primary adult learner

interviews through administrators, coordinators, and instructors/tutors beginning September 2009 and completed them in June 2010. Between March 2010 and July 2010, I completed follow-up interviews with adult learners. A period of at least three months passed between primary and follow-up interviews, with about half of the learners completing a follow-up interview. A single transcriber (not connected with participants or programs) transcribed each interview within a week of completion.<sup>28</sup> I also maintained a dissertation journal, documenting the interview process. I began coding and initial analysis of the transcripts and other documentary materials in June 2010 and completed these tasks in October 2010, after completing the year-long ethnographic case study.

I have collected and analyzed data from the following sources:

- Ten student interviews from Regional's GED course and eight adult learner interviews from County's one-on-one tutoring program.
- Eight follow-up interviews with adult learners and students.
- Three instructor interviews and three tutor interviews.
- Five interviews with staff members and administrators.
- A year-long ethnographic case study with the tutor-researcher and a single adult learner (August 2009-August 2010), including lesson plans, monthly progress reports, learner-generated materials, and a tutoring journal.
- Artifacts from both programs, including website pages, fliers, brochures, emails, and reports.

# **Sample and Focus**

Site selection began with the state's official government website, where I located the Career, Education, and Workforce Programs which provided a list of Adult Education Programs and Enrollment Contacts in the state.<sup>29</sup> The website briefly describes typical students and the programs available to them in these terms:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Interviews were transcribed to document the words and IDs of interviewees and the interviewer, with minimal attention to details found in other forms of transcription, such as intonation and the length of pauses. The transcripts use standard orthography and record vocalized laughter and pauses. Vocalized back-channeling (such as *okay* and *right*, but not gestures like head nods) and fillers (such as *uh* and *mm*) have also been transcribed. Time stamps indicate words that were unable to be understood in the recording. See Appendix A for a single page sample.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Information withheld so as not to reveal the location of the study.

More than 80,000 students are enrolled in [the state's] adult education programs each year. While adult students average 30 years of age, a student must be older than 16 years of age with education competencies below the level of high school graduates. Detailed eligibility requirements differ by program type and in some cases, high school graduates may qualify due to poor reading or lack of English language skills. For example, General Educational Development (GED) students could be senior citizens, recent immigrants, high school dropouts, or high school graduates without adequate skills. The educational goals of adult education students include achieving a personal goal, learning to read, getting a better job, gaining access to postsecondary education, setting a good example for their children, gaining citizenship, or other objectives.<sup>30</sup>

The list provided 335 potential sites throughout the state. I narrowed my search substantially according to location (readily accessible by car transport to facilitate my regular weekly visits for interviews) and an ABE focus.

### **ABE and GED Programs**

Although I used the ABE designation as a sorting tool to limit the pool of potential sites, I did not wish to eliminate all GED programs because I felt they also emphasized adult literacy education. Sponsors often join or conflate ABE and GED so that it is impossible to clearly separate the adult populations into neat categories.<sup>31</sup> Other institutions and organizations try to create distinct categories based primarily on the issue of certification: GED programs aim to prepare adults without high school diplomas to pass the 7.5 hour assessment of five tests that will provide a General Educational Development credential, while ABE learners do not focus on high school qualifications

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Website withheld so as not to reveal the location of the study.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Here is one attempt to make distinctions in program focus: "*Adult Basic Education* (ABE) programs generally serve adults who read at the eighth-grade level or below. Adult *English as a Second Language* (ESL) programs teach English to adults whose native language is not English. *Family Literacy* programs teach reading and other skills to both parents and their children. *Adult Literacy* programs include those elements of the above programs that deal with lower reading levels (eighth grade and below). *Adult Secondary Education* (ASE) programs generally serve adults who read above the eighth-grade level but who have neither a high school diploma nor high school equivalence (GED) certification. Together, these programs make up the *Adult Education and Literacy System* (AELS)" (ProLiteracy, 2003, p. 4).

because participants often have diplomas. However, both kinds of programs focus on reading, writing, and numeracy development with adults who would be described as being below the level required for high school completion. Both also emphasize functional literacy, attempting to move adults towards functioning more effectively in a literate world where they have had restricted access. Because research would benefit from the combining ABE and GED populations of adult literacy learners due to their similar emphases, I broadened my categories to allow for a greater variety of adult learners who are participating in adult literacy education. I did, however, eliminate all ESL designated programs because they introduce concerns and considerations, such as immigration status and translation, which I did not plan to study and would complicate data collection.

I examined eight potential research sites in the geographical area that offered specific ABE or GED focus before selecting two. One of the largest programs in the area never responded to any of my calls or emails over a period of four weeks. My conversations with personal assistants were pleasant and filled with assurances that my messages would be forwarded, but I never received a response and therefore removed this site from my list. Three of the other sites had to be eliminated because the first did not have enough student applicants to operate during my research period, the second was focusing on continuing education courses<sup>32</sup> rather than ABE or GED, and the third had no budget for ABE and focused on high school completion and alternative education, primarily for students under the age of 20. All three coordinators were extremely helpful and encouraging, but the sites were not the right fit. That left four sites.

Of the remaining four programs, I chose to focus on County Literacy and Regional Community College's Adult Adjustments program primarily because they had much larger adult learner populations than the remaining sites. I felt that their large populations would ensure that I would be able to interview 20 adult learner participants. Both sites had thorough descriptions of their programs online and were affiliated through a recent collaborative grant-writing project that had been successfully approved. I emailed and then met with the administrators, and both responded enthusiastically to my

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Continuing or further education can refer to any postsecondary programs or activities for adults that focus on improving or enhancing competencies that are not considered basic literacy skills.

work. Both administrators signed letters on April 20, 2009 indicating their willingness and permission to have me conduct research in their sites, including interviews with learners, instructors/tutors, staff, and administrators. I assured both administrators that I would not begin my data collection before receiving complete Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval.<sup>33</sup>

### Validity

In order to enhance validity, I have taken a number of steps to gather a variety of perspectives within and among stakeholders so that triangulation is possible, although my primary focus is on adult learners. The most essential sources of data for this research are the people most capable of articulating adult learners' understandings and expectations and commenting on their participation behavior—the adult learners themselves. While this study does not tap a large portion of the adult learners in the state, it does consider multiple views within two programs with differing goals and approaches. I have analyzed the responses of 18 adult learners, in addition to the single adult learner that I tutored in search of possible patterns within the data. Multiple adult learner interviews offer a variety of participants who provided me with unique understandings and expectations of literacy in their own words. My involvement in the ethnographic case study enhanced my understanding of the interviews, and it gave me an extended and detailed narrative of one adult learner against which to test my inferences for the group of adult learners.

I also include insight from three tutors/instructors, a staff member, and the administrator of each program so that I can triangulate their expertise and experience with the program as a whole with the data provided by adult learners. Their input allows for me to review, confirm, and challenge my own assumptions and inferences about the programs, using their perspectives about the learners and their programs. Tutors/instructors meet weekly with learners/students, work with multiple adults, and often bond with them, sometimes over periods longer than a year, and so their insight supplements what I learned from my interviews with learners. Staff members often meet

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> I received full approval for a two-year qualitative research study to begin on June 20, 2009 and expire June 19, 2011.

all learners upon entry and assist them in selecting the program, making their perspectives valuable. Administrators are a bridge between adult learners and often disembodied sponsors—grants, organizations, laws, and policies—so they provide insight into the ways that more powerful sponsors (like the federal government) perceive, mediate, distribute, and report understandings and expectations of literacy.

The final data resource is the disembodied sponsor, often an entity not visible to adult learners or even sponsors working in programs, but whose printed material establishes and endorses understandings and expectations of literature with which adult learners grapple. The disembodied sponsor's voice is not necessarily identical with the voices of tutors or staff members, and so I have included examples, such as mission statements, to see what consistencies and inconsistencies exist within sponsor-generated materials and among all participants. I have examined a number of print materials so that no single publication comes to represent the sponsor's official definition, and considered both public and semi-private materials to ensure a more complete representation of the sponsor's representations of literacy.

Finally, I endeavored to provide all participants with excerpts of their representations in my work prior to publication, allowing them to read and/or consider my thoughts and to respond to them (see Member Checking). If they offered corrections or suggestions, I altered the representation. I had no instances where I rejected the feedback of participants.

# **Ethics**

I have approached this project as a motivated novice, recognizing that I am new to the issues of adult literacy work and resisting the impulse to conflate it with the literacy education accomplished in K-12, community college, or university settings, contexts in which I have taught and studied. I entered both sites and the interview interactions as a curious and dedicated researcher who wanted to learn more about the ways adult learners and sponsors think about what they are learning and teaching. I presented myself as an enthusiastic newcomer to adult literacy who planned to teach and work with adults in the future, and so my goal in the research was to consult the experts, to find out what people want and if they are getting it.

In interactions with learners, I was aware that adults who seek literacy programs often feel ashamed or guilty about not having certain abilities in reading and writing. After all, the American system is geared to provide literacy for children. Adults are not expected to fall through the cracks, and those who do may feel immature and possibly infantilized by having to go back to what they see as primary or elementary school (Sticht, 2000). Adult learners have to concentrate on jobs, families, and bill payment, responsibilities that children do not have to face when they are schooled, and these can distract from literacy goals (Kerka, 1995). Employers, government agencies, and communities also apply pressure to adult learners (Quigley, 1998). For example, welfare benefits may be tied to expectations of completion, or a promotion may be contingent on workplace literacy programs, and these pressures can lead to feelings of inadequacy, of not measuring up to the norms. All of these factors and many others, when combined, can turn any adult literacy program into a stressful, pressure-filled experience.

As a researcher, I was conscious that asking questions that may require adult learners to reflect on painful experiences and draw attention to perceived deficiencies in their education and literacy could be unsettling. Therefore, I took the following steps to provide ethical treatment for all participants. I applied for and received IRB approval, ensuring that my project was within the accepted parameters of the state board. I solicited names from program directors and coordinators so that they would screen potential participants, providing me with names of only those who were willing to participate or at least willing to hear more about the project before signing a consent form.<sup>34</sup> I conducted interviews in public locations such as library study rooms, coffee shops, and classrooms, but the interviews were one-on-one so that participants could feel free to share more intimate details than if interviews, direct interactions with Trisha, and participant feedback of my written representations of them to facilitate consensus on my interpretations.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> See Appendix B for the learner consent form. Other consent forms were similarly designed.

## **Selected Research Sites**

# **County Literacy**

County Literacy has the following stated purpose: "We help adults change their lives through literacy. Our organization has over 35 years experience in helping men and women improve their reading, writing and English as a second language skills."<sup>35</sup> The program uses primarily a one-on-one designer tutoring approach (tutors design lesson plans based on learners' articulated goals), but it also offers some small group tutoring,<sup>36</sup> all with volunteer tutors. Tutors are required to complete a 15-hour training session and must commit to a year of service. Adult learners must commit to six months of tutoring. The work is divided between two distinct adult populations: basic learners and ESL learners. ESL learners are the primary participants in group tutoring sessions. The program serves approximately 1,500 adults per year and has a volunteer body of about 750, while the estimate for the number of low-literate adults in Central County is 27,000.<sup>37</sup>

Negotiating access to participants required sensitive attention to the individual needs of the sponsors and learners. Sponsors, such as coordinators and mentors, needed to be confident that my interviews would not disrupt the tutoring relationships and the positive public reputation that the program had already built. To build trust, I obtained permission from the chief administrator, received approval from IRB, and then met with the program's staff during a monthly staff meeting to explain my project and respond to concerns before contacting any learners. Additionally, learners needed to be assured that their participation in my research would not jeopardize support from the program serves a number of adults who do not wish others to know about their participation, including members of their households. When learners are interviewed initially by program coordinators and are asked for phone contact information, they indicate whether or not tutors or staff members may identify themselves as a part of County Literacy. I had to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Information withheld so as not to reveal the location of the study.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Group tutoring for basic literacy is fairly rare in the program.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Information on the history and statistics of County Literacy program was provided by the program administrator.

gain access to learners who did not know me and had no reason to trust me, and so I felt I needed to match this level of privacy by assuring anonymity and by using a trusted mediator.

In order to attend to these various needs, I relied on Brian, the coordinator of Basic Literacy, to make initial contact based on his familiarity with the learners. Brian was a former basic learner with the program who moved on to become a tutor and then a coordinator. His job description included recruiting and interviewing learners, often sharing his narrative of struggle and success. I met Brian first at an orientation session and then again in the tutor training session. We had several conversations and email exchanges during which we discussed my project and the kinds of learners I wished to interview. I informed him that all adult learners (except those in the ESL group) qualified, and I requested that he not streamline his selection by choosing, for example, all males or all new learners. He agreed to do so, and he was my sole mediator for the first few months of the research.

## **Recruiting County Literacy Learners**

Adult basic literacy learners within this program are generally seeking to improve their reading and writing literacies, but a few wish to work on numeracy. The variety of learner goals is evident on the Monthly Update Form that provides a checklist of the most common categories of accomplishments: personal, reading, writing, listening/ speaking, education, employment, economic, and community (See Appendix C). Most learners, about 60%, have graduated from high school, so they do not qualify for GED-based courses since they already possess diplomas.<sup>38</sup> The program accepts a full range of literacy learners, including those who cannot read or write words or letters, but they do not test for learning disabilities such as dyslexia or ADD. Some learners participate in this program while attending classes at Regional Community College, and the two programs have an official relationship of referral.

The tutor-learner program does not have restricted entry points for learners. It does not operate with terms or semesters, so there is no standardized calendar for

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> An adult with a high school diploma would gain no official educational capital with a GED certificate. While the classes and preparation could enhance literacies, the GED certificate does not enhance or trump a diploma, and in most cases, employers see it as less prestigious than the diploma (Garner, 1997).

tutoring. Tutor training happens just twice a year, but tutors can be assigned a learner at any time, and learners need only apply and be interviewed in order to be placed, provided a tutor is available. Therefore, I was not concerned with a class schedule, as with Regional Community College. I asked the Basic Literacy coordinator, Brian, to select and contact learners who would be willing to speak with me. The other coordinators told me they deferred to him because of his position but also because he had been a learner with the program many years ago. They all affirmed that he had a rapport with learners that they did not, and that he would be able to secure ten learners.

I began discussing learner selection with Brian and Michelle (another coordinator) in mid-August, expecting to begin interviews before the end of the month. Brian assured me that names were forthcoming whenever we met, but I received no names in September. In October, I sent an urgent email, indicating that I was anxious to begin and would readily accept just one name. The response from Michelle was that Brian had been ill for two weeks, and she would have one of the other coordinators work on contacting learners. The email response from the ESL coordinator stated the following:

I have made lots of calls, but have had no luck in reaching people. So, the good news is no one has said "no," but the bad news is I have no names to pass on. Tomorrow, after our staff meeting, I'll pass the list off to Brian who I believe will have more luck (because the learners know him).

Because of this delay, learner interviews did not begin until November, and by the end of the year, I had completed just three adult learner interviews. I had anticipated having all ten completed by that time, with follow-up interviews completed by March 2010. Brian had provided just five names, one of which did not respond to my calls and messages, and the other did not respond to my emails. I frequently emailed Brian and spoke to him in person to ask for more names, but my list remained limited. I attempted other tactics, such as emailing one learner's tutor (the learner had already been approached by Brian), and that garnered an interview after a personal introduction.

While I had estimated that approximately 25% of learners might drop out of the program and so become unavailable for follow-up interviews, I was dissatisfied with only four out of a target of ten. I emailed other coordinators, copying Brian on all requests. Coordinators acknowledged my requests for help, but they reported that learners would

not commit to interviews. In April 2010, when Brian was recovering from surgery, I relied on two other coordinators to make initial contact with tutor-learner pairs in order to gain additional interviews. As a result, I was able to interview four more adult learners by the end of June 2010.

I altered the selection process by not working only with Brian but also relying on the senior coordinator and my own mentor for names of tutors who might mediate contact with their learners. The tutors I contacted by email and telephone spoke with their learners and negotiated interviews. I spoke directly with only one of the four learners after her tutor provided a telephone contact. Tutors mediated the remaining three interviews. All four tutors received and reviewed the consent forms with their learners beforehand and were also present for introductions to their learners before leaving so I could conduct the interviews.

This altered process of interviews shaped the research in a number of ways. First, I had to extend follow-up interviews into summer 2010, a time that was difficult because of frequent summer and vacation travel, both on my part and the learners. This reduced the number of possible follow-ups. Second, I had input from more than one sponsor in learner selection, potentially offering greater variety in learner selection. For example, the learners provided by Brian represented his selection process (I offered direction, but I was not present during contact), but I gained access to learners through two additional coordinators who potentially had different selection criteria. Therefore, I gained greater variety, which may have resulted in a more diverse and authentic representation of the body of learners. Finally, using tutors may have influenced learners' decisions to participate since learners may have placed trust in their tutors to guide them into safe and productive learning activities.

Eight of the nine adult learners whom I contacted participated in interviews (Table 3.1). The missing interviewee spoke with me on several occasions but never confirmed an interview date and never returned my calls. This collection, however, offers a fair representation of the varieties of learners who participate within the program: people between 19 and 50 years of age, males and females, single and married people, parents and non-parents.

Name	Gender & Race	Age	Marital Status	Entered program	Children	Education	Occupation
Leonard	Male African American	50	married	10 years ago	3 daughters	No diploma	Stock picker
Daron	Male Caucasian	49	married	5 years ago	none	Diploma; enrolled in Regional's certification courses	Unemployed
Catlyn	Female Caucasian	20	single	1 year ago	none	Diploma; enrolled in Regional's pre-college courses	Student; server at pizza restaurant
Colyn	Male African American	37	single	17 years ago; re- entry	none	Diploma	Newspaper delivery
Vaughn	Male Caucasian	19	single	1.5 years ago	none	Diploma; enrolled in Regional's automotive program	Student; worked at an auto shop
Jennifer	Female African American	34	single	6 years ago	13-year old son	Diploma; enrolled in Regional's pre-college courses	Unemployed; former employee of a janitorial service
Thaddeus	Male African- American	34	married	2 years ago	4-year old daughter	Diploma; Failed Regional entrance exam	Unemployed; on disability aid
Antoinette	Female African American	??	single	2 years ago	6-year old daughter 13-year old son	No diploma; enrolled in Regional's GED program	Nursery child care
Trisha <sup>40</sup>	Female Caucasian	39	divorced	Aug. 2009	8-yr old daughter, 19-year old son	Diploma	Unemployed; on social welfare and disability aid

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> I relied on learners to supply their admission information. They provided estimates rather than exact dates.
 <sup>40</sup> Trisha is included here for quick reference and comparison.

This group of eight learners provides some insight into the range of adults that participate in this program. Almost all are high school graduates with diplomas, and so GED programs are not a logical or even necessary option for obtaining employment or college entry. For these learners, diplomas hold greater institutionalized cultural capital than GED qualifications, and those with regular diplomas fare better with wages and postsecondary accomplishments (Cameron & Heckman, 1993). All learners, except Leonard, mention attempting to enroll or participating in courses and programs offered at Regional Community College. Many refer to dramatic events, often failure to get or do something, as part of their motivation to join County Literacy. At the same time, however, learners speak of multiple motivations, suggesting that the drive to participate is a network of forces at work in a single individual.

## **Tutor-Learner Ethnographic Case Study**

In addition to the interviews with sponsors and learners within the program, I studied one learner for a year in an ethnographic case study based on a tutor-learner relationship. I drew on the nature of case studies, which, according to Marshall and Rossman (2006), "rely on historical and document analysis, interviewing, and typically some forms of observation for data collection" (p. 164). I studied the life of one learner in a tutoring relationship as fully as possible in order to focus on her understandings and expectations of literacy in our interviews and interactions. The case study also provided me with insight as a sponsor of literacy since I was in the role of tutor and responsible to the authority of County Literacy. While I was not the actual adult learner, my role as tutor allowed me intimate contact with the literacy learning activities of one learner and provided closer contact with the program's structure and expectations.

The program agreed to let me do this case study provided that I completed full tutor training, adhered to the guidelines for being a tutor (primarily to commit to one year of service), and obtained full learner consent. I completed my 15-hour tutor training for basic learners with County Literacy in June 2009. Each of the five sessions emphasized lesson planning, goal setting, and a number of role-playing activities so that tutors become acquainted with the tutoring routine. We also used a text—*LITSTART: Strategies* 

*for Adult Literacy and ESL Tutors*—that explores the topics of speaking, reading, word study, and writing as they might apply to a variety of adult learners.

My research plan for this year–long case study was for us to meet for two hours each week, as required by the program. I intended to audio record a 15-minute interview with Trisha about every two weeks (about 25 interviews for the year) for the year we met, in order to document her understandings and expectations of literacy. I also developed a dissertation journal, a tutoring journal, and a series of lesson plans that documented the time we spent together. I assumed that the combination of interviews along with my documentation of our weekly interactions would provide research material from which to mine data for the project.

I ensured that my responsibilities as a tutor were never compromised so that my desire for an interview did not impinge on the agreement I had with Trisha and County Literacy to provide at least two full hours of tutoring a week based on her learning goals. I conducted interviews before or after two-hour tutoring sessions and never pursued them if Trisha felt she was too tired or too pressed for time. I submitted monthly progress reports to the program, documenting our meeting and preparation hours, as well as sharing successes and concerns.

The execution of this ethnographic case study, however, varies from my original assumptions and plans. Trisha and I were unable to meet for 52 two-hour sessions in the year due to anticipated conflicts such as vacations and travels on my part and court dates and relocation on Trisha's part. In addition, a number of unanticipated interruptions affected our routine, including sickness, emotional distress, transportation issues, and family concerns. In total, Trisha and I met 24 times for the year and were able to record 13 interviews.

#### **Recruiting County Literacy Sponsors**

I conducted sponsor interviews without incident. I interviewed three tutors in September and October and then two coordinators (staff members) in November. Brian was a particularly intriguing interviewee since he has been a learner, tutor, staff member, and administrator within the program. I already had my required staff interview before I added Brian as an interviewee. He signed a staff consent form, but he embodies many different roles. I interviewed the program's director in March 2010. Coordinators also assisted me with collecting printed program resources including newsletters, forms, and reports.

The sponsors selected for this study include the executive director of the program, the Basic Literacy coordinator, the Program Coordinator, and three volunteer tutors (Table 3.2). The sponsors have a range of experiences with literacy work, both here and elsewhere. Brian and Violet have been with County Literacy longer than the director, and Violet and Amanda have previous tutoring experience. Abigail has been in her position for less than two years, and Rosa began tutoring just a few months before her interview. They all express enthusiasm for their roles and see this work with adult literacy as extremely important.

Name	Job title	Gender	Race	Years in Job
Amanda	Volunteer tutor	Female	Caucasian	5 years
Rosa	Volunteer tutor	Female	Caucasian	< 1 year
Violet	Volunteer tutor	Female	Caucasian	< 1 year
Abigail	Executive Director	Female	Caucasian	1.5 years
Brian	Basic Literacy Coordinator	Male	Caucasian	10 years
Michelle	Program Coordinator	Female	Caucasian	7 years

 Table 3.2: Sponsor Profiles for County Literacy

The sponsors all have an impact on learners in various ways. Abigail does not have direct contact with learners, but she focuses on fundraising for the program and so is in constant communication with other sponsors. The tutors have weekly interactions with single learners, not groups, and the amount of time they have spent with each learner varies from never having met the learner to working with a learner for more than a year. Brian and Michelle have extended contact with learners when they first enter the program; they interview, assess, and place learners with tutors but see very little of learners afterwards, unless a problem or concern arises. Their interviews provide insight into the way that sponsors interact with learners at various stages of their literacy learning.

## **Regional Community College**

The Adult Adjustments Program at Regional Community College focuses primarily on GED preparation courses or Skills Building courses, although it also works with pre-GED or developmental groups. The program does not accept those who perform below sixth-grade level. It offers three ten-week semesters, including ten classes that run in the summer. This program started in 1998 with only two students in an abandoned school building, but it now serves about 750 students annually and approximately 350 per semester. It has three sites, but most of the classes are held on the college campus.<sup>41</sup>

I met with Allison Smith, the Professional Services Instructor (PSI) in April 2009, and she gave preliminary written consent for access to students and staff. I later applied for and received official approval from the Office of the Vice President for Instruction. As with County Literacy, this program also wished to make initial contact with the instructors and learners rather than have me approach them directly. Allison offered to speak with instructors concerning interviews with them and students, and we agreed to rely on them to recommend student participants. She felt that certain instructors would be motivated to assist and would facilitate locating willing participants.

I received contact information for one instructor and a counselor in mid-September and had my first sponsor interviews the first week of October. Allison sent two more instructor names in early October and by mid-November I had completed all sponsor interviews for Regional. Interviews with adult students, however, took several months to complete for a number of reasons. Two of the 20 students I contacted were 17 years old and would have required parental permission, so I did not interview them. Four learners arranged interviews but never showed, while four others never returned my calls. By the end of the fall semester at Regional, I had completed five interviews. I completed

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Information on the Adult Adjustments program was provided by the Professional Services Instructor at Regional Community College.

the remaining five interviews in the winter semester with a new list of names provided by a single instructor.

## **Recruiting Regional Community College Learners**

Adult learners within this program seek to earn the GED certification, usually to qualify for entry into a college system. Regional encourages and supports students who wish to transfer smoothly from this course into its mainstream college classes. Students in this program have not received high school diplomas, but they are expected to have literacy skills at a sixth-grade level or higher. Students are tested and meet with an academic counselor before being accepted into the program. Those who do not qualify often are referred to County Literacy.

The first class of the fall semester began on September 22, and I intended to have student interviews lined up before the start of classes so that I might speak to students before they were long engaged in the GED course. Courses last only ten weeks, so I needed to interview students before they finished and potentially moved on to new courses or moved to new geographies. However, the semester started and securing learner names took much longer than I had planned. I was constrained because I depended on the program administrator to contact instructors who would then approach students and supply contact details of those willing to participate. I suspect instructors had many higher priorities and obligations in the first few weeks of the semester than my research requests.

Initial interviews with students began in November 2009 and ran through April 2010. While instructors provided names in October, none of the students contacted agreed to an interview before November. I conducted ten student interviews, but when I began calling for follow-up interviews in March 2010, only two of ten students agreed to a second interview. I did not reach the majority of the students directly, but I left up to three messages for each of them over the space of a month without any returned calls from the eight. One student cancelled two of our follow-up appointments before ceasing to correspond. Two students hung up on me when I reached them.

The ten adult learners included in this research are from a pool of 22 recommended students (Table 3.3). This collection offers a fair representation of the

varieties of learners who participate within the program, with ages between 20 and 38, males and females, single and married, parents and non-parents.

Name	Gender & Race	Age	Marital Status	Entered program <sup>42</sup>	Children	Recent Education	Occupation
Todd	Male Caucasian	20	Single	Sept. 2009 (re-entry)	None	None	Unemployed, Part-time Cleaner
Maria	Female Caucasian	30	Married	Sept. 2009	8-year old son 13-year old son	None	Stay-at-home mother, Part- time Cleaner
Renee	Female Caucasian	25	Single	Summer 2009	At least one child	None	Unemployed
Julian	Male African American	36	Single	Sept. 2009	None	None	Cook on oil rig
Bethany	Female Caucasian	21	Single	Jan. 2010	4-year old son	certified medical assistant	Unemployed
Rachel	Female Caucasian	31	Single	Jan. 2010	7-year old son	None	Unemployed
Sarah	Female Hispanic American	28	Married	Two years ago	1-year old, 8-year old	Enrolled at Regional for Spring 2010	Unemployed; fast food restaurants and hotels
Bruce	Male African American	33	Single	Jan. 2010	None	Another GED program	Auto mechanic
Devin	Male African American	22	Single	Sept. 2009	None	Prison GED program	Unemployed
Shania	Female Caucasian	38	Single	Sept. 2009	17-year old, 18-year old, 19-year old	None	Manager of an automotive company

Table 3.3: Adult Learner Profiles at Regional Community College

This group of ten learners provides some insight into the range of adults that participate in this program. The certificate was not an end in itself but a means to an end:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> I relied on learners to supply their admission information. They provided estimates rather than exact dates.

access to higher education or new/better employment. The lack of a diploma provided a gate keeping function that could only be challenged with an equivalent certification. None of the interviewees identified the program as an explicit way to improve their reading and writing practices. Many of them were able to pass reading and writing testing components after about a month of preparation, suggesting that many students were already functionally literate. No one highlighted academic failure or a struggle with reading and writing as a reason for leaving high school. Reasons for dropping out included pregnancy, peer pressure, criminal activity, and family obligations. Most students mentioned mathematics as the subject and test that created the greatest anxiety. Perhaps the value of the course had less to do with literacy learning and more to do with motivation and official support.

#### **Recruiting Regional Community College Sponsors**

Similar to my experience with County Literacy, interviewing sponsors was less difficult than securing adult learner interviews. I completed my interviews with sponsors—one administrator, one staff person, and three instructors—in October and November of 2009. All sponsors were passionate about their work with adult students. They all helped me locate and generate artifacts about the program, including emails, web pages, brochures, fliers, application forms, grant proposals, and public relations materials.

The sponsors I selected for interviews included the Professional Services Director, one counselor, and three instructors (Table 3.4). Sponsors had a range of experiences with the program. Allison had been instrumental in creating the program before overseeing it, and all of the instructors had more than 5 years teaching in the program. They had all worked in education prior to this GED program, some in high school and others in community college settings. Each was able to share a number of student success stories from their experiences with the program.

As with County Literacy sponsors, I offer less attention to the lives and demographics of these sponsors because I interviewed them to gain information to enhance my representation of adult learners and their understandings and expectations. I was not seeking a better representation of sponsors, and so I have limited profile

information to position, gender, race, and experience with no details on marital status, educational attainment, or age.

Name	Job title	Gender	Race	Years in Job
Katrina	Instructor	Female	Caucasian	10 years
Shirley	Instructor	Female	Caucasian	10 years
Sharice	Instructor	Female	Caucasian	6 years
Allison	Professional Services Instructor	Female	Caucasian	11 years
Marcy	Counselor	Female	Caucasian	5 years

Table 3.4: Sponsor Profiles for Regional Community College

These sponsors all have an impact on learners in various ways. Allison has shaped the program from its inception, and she coordinates other departments in the college to help learners transition into college-level programs. The instructors interact with groups of learners, between 10 and 40 students per class, three times a week for 10 weeks. Learners may leave within a few weeks, after passing all tests, but some might remain with that instructor for three semesters, increasing interaction. Marcy, a counselor, interacts with large number as well, about 100 students a week, helping them to navigate the program requirements and their goal setting. They all actively influence the learners whom they meet and work with in the program, and all expressed a commitment to the success of the adult students.

## A Word about Race

While the category of race is one of the descriptors for sponsor and learner profiles, I do not develop the topic and influence of race in my research.<sup>43</sup> I included the descriptor primarily to enhance the profiles. The adult learners are primarily in two racial categories. There are 10 Caucasians, 8 African Americans, and one Hispanic American (Sarah identified her origin in her introduction) in the group of participants. Five of the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> For research based on racial and other descriptors see "Formal Education and Adult Literacy Proficiencies: Exploring the Relevance of Gender, Race, Age, Income, and Parents' Education" by Carl F. Kaestle, based on the National Adult Literacy Survey of 1992.

nine learner interviewees at County are African Americans, while only three at Regional are. All of the sponsors interviewed are Caucasians. Tutor and instructor selection depended upon the recommendations of administrators and coordinators. I did not refuse any sponsor or learner recommended to me based on any racial quota system. Also, because the study was spread out over a year, and I did not ask sponsors or learners to identify their race before meeting them, I was not aware of racial group percentages until the study was completed, restricting early analysis and modification of interview protocols.

I was not drawn to this project by a specific interest in race, gender, or age, and I acknowledge that my own interests affected the interview protocols. I recognize that my own race might have led to forms of identification as well as alienation with both sponsors and learners. This may have been further complicated by my speech that would identify me as non-American. I also acknowledge that learners' lives are significantly influenced by racial identification, prejudice, and discrimination, but this study does not address the influence of such forces in the analysis.

A key reason for not pursuing racial analysis is that most learners did not directly reference race, and my goal was to be directed by their words. While I did not include questions about race, no learner or sponsor chose to raise the issue when first responding to my questions or even during tangential conversation that moved away from the original topic. Todd, a Caucasian male, is the only person to mention race as a factor that affected his decision to join. When asked what he was involved in before joining this program, Todd replied,

*Todd:* Oh, I was just sitting around basically reading. I tried to go to Job Corps, but I think they're kind of racist.

Randy: Uh-hmm.

*Todd:* Like I was the only white guy there, so I don't think they wanted me in there.

*Randy:* And did you try that just, you tried just that one program?*Todd:* Yeah. I, I didn't know where [the program] was at.*Randy:* Okay.

*Todd:* We knew where Job Corps was so we went down there and we went to like six interviews and they,

Randy: Okay.

*Todd:* I just had, I just had the final straw and uh, uh in July *Randy:* Uh-hmm.

*Todd:* because they said, Oh, you can't do this, why, we still need you to do stuff and then you can come back for another interview, so I just said, Screw it,

*Randy:* Uh-hmm.

*Todd:* I'm going to go to GED. (Todd 1.3-4)<sup>44</sup>

Todd seems to believe that the job placement service was meant for minorities, so he was unwanted. He uses this rejection along with his frustration with the process of finding placement to motivate his return to the GED program. He never mentions race in connection with his time at Regional's GED program. While race would be an important factor to study, it remains outside the scope and purposes of this research.

I am, therefore, extremely reticent to draw any conclusions regarding race based on the descriptor information. Without specific conversation with participants about the ways that they see race affecting their understandings and expectations of literacy I would find myself doing the very thing I am resisting for this study—drawing conclusions about learners behavior based on quantitative data such as racial classification. Other researchers have suggested that descriptors such as race have not produced useful information about persistence. In *Persistence among Adult Basic Education Students in Pre-GED Classes*, Comings, Parrella, and Soricone (1999) conducted a study that collected interviews from 150 pre-general educational development (GED) students in New England "to gain their insights into the supports and barriers to persistence" (p. 13). They comment that

> We classify adult students in many ways: by gender, ethnicity, age, employment status, number and age of children, previous school experience, and educational background of other adults in their lives. The

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> I use this citation system when referencing interviews: Name of participant interview#.page #. E.g., (Todd 1.3-4).

first phase of the Persistence Study revealed that these categories do not tell us much about how to help adults persist in their education. (p. 14) The categories did not speak for the adults. While my future research may address important considerations such as race, gender, and age, I have chosen not to use these descriptors for my analysis.

## **Data Collection**

# Interviews

All interviews with adult learners, tutors/ instructors, staff members, and administrators occurred between September 2009 and August 2010, and each was transcribed using a single paid transcriber.<sup>45</sup> My goal was to collect descriptions of authentic learner experiences. As Silverman (1993) points out, with interviews "the primary issue is to generate data which give an authentic insight into people's experiences" (p. 91). I developed the interview process, guided by the concept of active interviewing, the recognition that meaning is constructed in the moment between interviewer and interviewee rather than simply extracted from the mind of the interviewee (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). This means that "interviews are conversations where meanings are not only conveyed, but cooperatively built up, received, interpreted, and recorded by the interviewer" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 11). I sought learners' authentic understandings and expectations, but I recognized the influence I would have on their words just by participating in the conversation. In the interviews, therefore, I asked questions that explored topics with interviewees from multiple angles, such as asking about goals as well as reasons for being in the program. The collection of responses from our conversation provides a fuller description than an answer to a single question.

I followed the same basic interview procedure in my interviews with learners and sponsors. All interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, covering essential topics but also leaving the interviews open to unanticipated directional shift and elaboration

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> The transcriber confirmed, in writing, that she had no affiliation with either adult literacy program.

(Silverman, 1993).<sup>46</sup> This structure provided some consistency and facilitated comparison/contrast in that interviewees commented on common issues such as understandings and expectations of literacy, but it also afforded opportunities for me to explore tangents or return to previous topics. I scheduled interviews in quiet and secluded places to allow clear audio recording and afford some privacy for the interviews. I selected locations, dates, and times based on the expressed needs and availabilities of the interviewees. All interviews were face-to-face interactions in order to permit in-person review of the consent form and to allow me to better gauge the responses of the interviewees based on body language and eye contact. I asked participants if they wished to know the range of questions before recording began, and I recited the questions if participants requested, with the exception of the question "What comes to mind when you hear the word *literacy*?"<sup>47</sup> Each interview began with a request for an introduction including age, geographical origin, and an interest or personal detail. Following the introduction, the first question always addressed how participants became involved with the program.

Tutors/instructors, staff members, and administrators were among the first to be interviewed (Tables 3.5 and 3.6). These single interviews provided essential background information about the programs, often supplying information that adult learners could not, or confirming information provided by them. For example, some students could not remember the length of their course or the passing scores required for the GED tests. Administrators provided me with the names of tutors/instructors and staff whom they felt were amenable. I contacted each via email or telephone. I interviewed staff and administrators in their offices and instructors/ tutors in a number of quiet locations such as empty university offices or classrooms. I interviewed administrators after all other sponsors. Essential topics included their personal history, understandings of the term *literacy*, impressions of the program and the participants, and attendance issues.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> See Appendices D, E, F, and G for lists of interview questions for learners and sponsors.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> I was seeking immediate impressions and associations that could be followed by more careful thought and discussion, not overly prepared responses.

Name	Date of Request	Location	Date, Time	Length min:sec	Notes: First contact
Amanda	Sept. 22, 2009	Study Room	Oct. 29, 2010, 3:30 p.m.	29:35	By email: Confirmed interview.
Rosa	Sept. 20, 2009	Office	Sept. 28, 2010, 5:15 p.m.	32:05	By email: Confirmed interview.
Violet	Sept. 20, 2009	Office	Oct. 29, 2010, 11:15 a.m.	19:17	By email: Confirmed interview.
Abigail	Feb. 17, 2010	County Literacy Office	Mar. 12, 2010, 9 a.m.	29:13	By email. Confirmed Feb. 25, then I rescheduled for Mar. 12.
Brian	Nov. 4, 2009	Library	Nov. 12, 2010, 11 a.m.	29:33	By email: Confirmed interview.
Michelle	Nov. 4, 2009	Library	Nov. 12, 2010, 10 a.m.	30:25	By email: Confirmed interview.

Table 3.5: Sponsors at County Literacy: Interview Schedule

Name	Date of Request	Location	Interview Date	Length min:sec	Notes: First contact
Katrina	Sept. 20, 2009	Conference room	Oct. 1, 2009, 1:15 p.m.	26:53	By email: Confirmed interview.
Shirley	Oct. 6, 2009	Classroom	Nov. 10, 2009, 5 p.m.	32:08	By email: No response. I contacted Allison and then made email contact on Nov. 4 Set interview by phone.
Sharice	Oct. 6, 2009	Classroom	Oct. 13, 2009, 12 noon	27:12	By email: Confirmed interview.
Allison	Oct. 1, 20009	Regional Office	Oct. 13, 2009, 3:30 p.m.	36:19	By email: Confirmed interview.
Marcy	Sept. 20, 2009	Regional Office	Oct. 1, 2009, 4 p.m.	26:38	By email: Confirmed interview.

 Table 3.6: Sponsors at Regional Community College: Interview Schedule

I interviewed adult learners in a similar procedure with a few important alterations. After receiving names of learners from sponsors, I called or emailed the learners to arrange meetings, or sometimes the tutor or instructor acted as mediator. Prior to each interview, participants reviewed the consent form with me, and we addressed questions and concerns before signing. Learners had the option of doing this in the presence of their tutors if this made them more comfortable, but the interviews only involved the learner and me, usually in a library study room or an empty classroom. Essential topics included personal history, high school experiences, understandings of the term *literacy*, impressions of the current program and past programs, future plans, and motivating forces for attendance. However, no two interviews followed a prescribed order as participants told their stories, sometimes addressing issues in high school very early on in the interview, even though this was a much later topic/ question on my list. Using this approach offered greater potential agency to participants, although several only responded directly to my questions without much elaboration in the interview.

The following tables (Tables 3.7 and 3.8) provide information relating to initial interviews with learners at both sites.

Name	Initial Contact	Location	Date, Time	Length min:sec	Notes: First contact
Leonard	Nov. 5, 2009	Library	Nov. 7, 2010, 11:30 a.m.	51:34	By phone: Asked to be called around 5:30 p.m. Requested phone interview, but agreed to meet.
Daron	Nov. 4, 2009	Library	Nov. 9, 2010, 5:30 p.m.	29:16	By phone
Catlyn	Nov. 13, 2009	Coffee Shop	Feb. 2, 2010, 12 noon	12:42	By email: Phone calls failed on Nov. 4th, 5th, and 10th. Emailed her tutor and set Nov. 13, 2009.
Colyn	Dec. 9, 2009	I-Hop	Dec. 11, 2009, 8 p.m.	31:22	By phone.
Vaughn	Apr. 23, 2010	Regional Student Building	Apr. 27, 2010, 4:30 p.m.	25:35	By Email: Meeting negotiated by email through his tutor.
Jennifer	May 1, 2010	Library	May 3, 2010, 1 p.m.	27:28	By phone: after email contact with tutor.
Thaddeus	May 12, 2010	Library	May 12, 2010, 5:30 p.m.	18:27	By email: Meeting negotiated by email through his tutor.
Antoinette	May 20, 2010	Library	June 2, 2010, 6:30 p.m.	12:06	By email: Meeting negotiated by email through her tutor.

 Table 3.7: Adult Learners at County Literacy: Initial Interviews

Name	Initial Contact	Location	Date, Time	Length min:sec	Notes: First contact
Todd	Nov. 5, 2009	Library	Nov. 17, 2010, 5:30 p.m.	15:34	By phone: I called Oct. 26 and 29 and Nov 5, leaving messages. Todd rescheduled twice.
Maria	Nov. 4, 2009	Library	Nov. 4, 2010, 5:30 p.m.	12:27	By phone: I called Oct. 26 Oct. and 29, leaving messages. Meeting was brokered through Renee.
Renee	Oct. 26, 2009	Library	Nov. 4, 2010, 5:00 p.m.	10:43	By phone: I called 26 Oct. and left a message. I called Oct. 29 and confirmed a meeting.
Julian	Oct. 29, 2009	Library	Nov. 2, 2010, 11:30 a.m.	26:00	By phone: I called 26 Oct. and left a message. I called Oct. 29 and confirmed a meeting.
Bethany	Feb. 2, 2010	Classroom	Feb. 16, 2010, 12:15 p.m.	19:54	By phone: I called Feb 2 and arranged a meeting for Feb. 9. She rescheduled again for Feb. 16 because of weather.
Rachel	Feb. 15, 2010	Classroom	Feb. 17, 2010, 12:15 p.m.	12:33	By phone: I called Feb. 2 and left a message. I called on Feb. 15 and confirmed a meeting.
Sarah	Feb 16, 2010	Classroom	Mar. 10, 2010, 12noon	14:19	In person: Sarah met me before her class. I called Feb 17 and left a message. I called Feb. 23, confirmed an interview, but she did not show and rescheduled.
Bruce	Feb. 16, 2010	Classroom	Feb. 23, 2010, 12 noon	18:53	In person: Bruce met me before his class. I called Feb. 2; the number was disconnected. I called Feb 17 and confirmed an interview.
Devin	Nov. 11, 2009	Library	Nov. 20, 2009, 12noon	17:21	By phone: I called Nov. 11 and confirmed an interview on Nov 16. He rescheduled for Nov. 20.
Shania	Oct. 29, 2009	Library	Nov. 2, 2009, 5: 00 p.m.	20:57	By phone: I called Oct. 26 and left a message. I called Oct. 29 and confirmed an interview.

 Table 3.8: Adult Learners at Regional Community College: Initial Interviews

# **Follow-Up Interviews**

I attempted follow-up interviews based on the initial interviews with adult learners in order to clarify ideas from the primary interview, and to update developments in their lives, such as passing the GED certification or establishing new personal goals (Table 3.9 and 3.10). The follow-up interviews also provided an opportunity for them to review and revise my impressions of our previous interview and my record and memory of their responses, creating one form of member checking.

Name	Initial Contact	Location	Date, Time	Length min:sec	Contact Notes
Leonard	Apr. 23, 2010		NONE		By telephone: He declined a 2 <sup>nd</sup> interview.
Daron	Apr. 21, 2010	Library	May 4, 2010, 12:30 p.m.	29:30	By telephone: I had left a message Mar. 23. He called May 3 and confirmed a meeting.
Catlyn	Apr. 22, 2010	Coffee Shop	May 11, 2010, 12:10 p.m.	8:54	By email: I wrote to Catlyn, and copied her tutor who confirmed on May 3 <sup>rd</sup> that she could meet.
Colyn	Mar. 23, 2010	І-Нор	Apr. 13, 2010, 2:30 p.m.	23:10	By telephone: We set an interview for Apr. 9 but rescheduled for Apr 13.
Vaughn	July 30, 2010		NONE		By email: I wrote to Vaughn and his tutor but received no response from them.
Jennifer	Aug. 1, 2010	Library	Aug. 13, 2010, 1 p.m.	21:52	By telephone: I called and left a message. She called and agreed to an interview on Aug. 13.
Thaddeus	July 30, 2010		NONE		By email: His tutor was no longer tutoring due to family issues and did not know Thaddeus's status.
Antoinette	July 30, 2010		NONE		By email: Her tutor consulted Antoinette and set a meeting for Sept. 8, but then cancelled. I stopped calling.

Table 3.9: Adult Learners at County Literacy: Follow-up Interviews

Name	Initial Contact	Location	Date, Time	Length min:sec	Notes
Todd	Mar. 23, 2010	Library	Mar. 31, 2010, 3 p.m.	7:11	I called Mar. 23, and set to meet on Mar. 29. He rescheduled twice.
Maria	May 6, 2010		NONE		I called Mar. 23, leaving a message. On Apr. 23, I sent a text. I called May 6, and she asked me to call back. I did and left a message, then sent a text.
Renee			NONE		I called Feb. 15 and Mar. 23 and left messages. On Apr. 23, I sent a text. I called May 6; left a message. I sent a text May 15.
Julian			NONE		I called Feb. 17 and Mar. 23 and left messages. I sent a text on Apr. 23. I called Apr. 23 and May 6 & left messages. I sent a text 15 May.
Bethany			NONE		I sent a text on Apr. 23. I called Apr. 23.and may 4 and 15 and received a message that the number was incorrect.
Rachel	May 15, 2010	Library	June 3, 2010, 9 a.m.	6:26	I called and left a message and sent a text on Apr. 23. I called May 6 and left a message. I called on May 15and confirmed an interview. She rescheduled.
Sarah			NONE		I sent a text on Apr. 23. She sent a text. I called on Apr. 24 and May 4 and left messages. I sent a text on May 15.
Bruce	Apr. 26, 2010	Classroom	Apr. 29, 2010, 12 noon	11:36	I sent a text Apr. 23 and called, leaving a message. He called on Apr.26 and confirmed interview.
Devin	Mar 23, 2010		NONE		I called on Mar. 23, 2010 and scheduled an interview. He cancelled twice. I sent a text on May 4 and called, leaving a message. I sent a text on May 15. I called on July 19; the number was disconnected.
Shania	Apr. 23, 2010	Regional Library	May 6, 2010, 6 p.m.	6:24	I called Feb. 15 and Mar. 23 and left messages. I sent a text on Apr. 23. She sent a text, and we confirmed an interview.

 Table 3.10: Adult Learners at Regional Community College: Follow-up Interviews

I was able to conduct follow-up interviews with just eight learners, four from each program, approximately 45% of the 18 learners (Trisha not included). While I had not expected to be able to meet with the full number based on my experiences with scheduling initial interviews, I had thought follow-up interviews would have been less difficult since learners already knew what to expect. Some learners had expressed anxiety during their first interview, but I never had the sense that the process was unpleasant or painful. Those that did agree to meet were very supportive and expressed an interest in the progress of my research. Although I realize that complex adult lives, including relocation, employment, and family commitments, had a role to play in the reduction of follow-up interviews, I am unable to provide a fuller explanation since I was unable to contact so many learners.

My tutoring relationship with Trisha, however, did show the complexity of adult learners' lives, and she remained in constant communication regarding any changes to our scheduled meetings. The year-long ethnographic case study included monthly interviews, between 7 and 21 minutes each. I conducted these interviews before or after a tutoring session, but we never took away time from the two-hour tutoring session for an interview. We scheduled interviews based on issues raised by Trisha and from topics that surfaced when I was writing field notes. Interviews were usually pre-arranged, that is, we booked two hours and 15 minutes for our weekly meeting when I anticipated an interview. On a few occasions, Trisha was willing to extend our time in the moment so that we could record something that might have surfaced after setting our meeting. I did not record the lessons themselves, so if Trisha addressed issues during the tutoring session that I felt were relevant to the research, I had to request an impromptu interview or record the details in my tutoring journal.

Table 3.11 documents the 13 interviews with Trisha over the course of a year at two public libraries, and Table 3.12 outlines the 24 tutoring sessions.

Interview	Location	Date, Time	Length	<b>Topics/ Comments</b>
Interview 1	Library A	Sept. 4, 2009, 12:15 p.m.	8:40 minutes	Joining County Literacy
Interview 2	Library A	Sept. 22, 2009, 12:15 p.m.	16:16 minutes	Her daughter's school work, her son's hospitalization, her health, finding a new apartment.
Interview 3	Library A	Oct. 23, 2009, 12:15 p.m.	10:15 minutes	Struggles with past literacy services, Jewish Family Services, navigating social services.
Interview 4	Library A	Nov. 3, 2009, 11:45 a.m.	7:53 minutes	Problems with husband, concerns about daughter, housing, Jewish Family Services. Ends with tears.
Interview 5	Library A	Nov. 17, 2009, 12noon	7:22 minutes	The lesson on compound words, activities she enjoys, helping her daughter with school work, finding time for study, new goals.
Interview 6	Library A	Jan. 26, 2010, 12noon	21:22 minutes	Trisha moved into a new place and was concerned about how her kids were coping.
Interview 7	Library A	Mar. 26, 2010, 12:30 p.m.	15:12 minutes	Talk about her texting abilities and practices; some discussion of her divorce and struggles with her husband; laptop
Interview 8	Library A	Apr. 7, 2010, 2 p.m.	16:16 minutes	Her divorce, navigating the courts, past literacy experiences, getting her driver's license and working with tutors.
Interview 9	Library A	May 20, 2010, 12noon	15:48 minutes	Moving again, her kids.
Interview 10	Library A	June 3, 2010, 12noon	15:10 minutes	Summer plans, moving house, literacy goals, divorce, frustration with the court sister, consultation with the women's center.
Interview 11	Library B	June 29, 2010, 10:30 a.m.	15:40 minutes	Social Security disability, working with the court system, her frustration with her own lawyer.
Interview 12	Library B	July 15, 2010, 12:35 p.m.	9:40 minutes	Her writing for literacy magazine, selecting new books ( <i>Twilight</i> )
Interview 13	Library B	July 28, 2010, 12:40	21:27 minutes	Memories of school, some positive around geography, difficulties with reading/spelling, discipline, job placement.

 Table 3.11: Adult Learner Case Study: Trisha's Interviews

Tutoring Sessions	Location	Session Date	Time	Торіс	Postponed Meeting Dates
Lesson 1	Library A	Aug. 26, 2009	5-6 p.m.	Introduction and Goals	
Lesson 2	Library A	Sept. 4, 2009	12-2 p.m.	Job Applications	Sept. 2, 2009
Lesson 3	Library A	Sept. 22, 2009	9-11 a.m.	Word Families	Sept. 8, 2009
Lesson 4	Library A	Oct. 13 2009,	1-3 p.m.	LEA	Sept. 29, 2009 Oct. 2, 2009 Oct. 6, 2009
Lesson 5	Library A	Oct. 23 2009,	12-2 p.m.	Halloween	
Lesson 6	Library A	Oct. 27 2009,	11-1 p.m.	Halloween 2	
Lesson 7	Library A	Nov. 3, 2010,	12-2 p.m.	Word Searches	
Lesson 8	Library A	Nov. 17, 2009	12-2 p.m.	Scrabble	Nov. 10, 2009
Lesson 9	Library A	Dec. 8, 2009	1-3 p.m.	Sight Words	Nov. 24, 2009 Dec. 1, 2009
Lesson 10	Library A	Dec. 9, 2009	12-2 p.m.	Sight Words	
Lesson 11	Library A	Jan. 26, 2010	12-2:30 p.m.	Journaling	Jan. 13, 2010
Lesson 12	Library A	Feb. 23, 2010	1-3 p.m.	Reading	Feb. 3, 2010 Feb. 10, 2010 Feb. 11, 2010
Lesson 13	Library A	Mar. 26, 2010	12-2 p.m.	Searching the Internet	Mar. 24, 2010
Lesson 14	Library A	Apr 1, 2010	12-2 p.m.	Expository Writing	Mar. 31, 2010
Lesson 15	Library A	Apr. 7, 2010	2-4 p.m.	Reading Rhythm	
Lesson 16	Library A	Apr. 20, 2010	12-2 p.m.	Phonics	Apr. 13, 2010
Lesson 17	Library A	June 3, 2010,	10-12noon	Goals	Apr. 28, 2010 May 12, 2010 May 20, 2010 June 2, 2010
Lesson 18	Library A	June 8, 2010	10-12noon	Twilight	
Lesson 19	Library B	June 29, 2010	10:30 a.m 12:30 p.m.	Introduction Essay	
Lesson 20	Library B	July 2, 2010	10:30 a.m 12:30 p.m.	Trisha's Story	July 1, 2010
Lesson 21	Library B	July 15, 2010	10:30 a.m 12:30 p.m.	Reading Day	
Lesson 22	Library B	July 22, 2010	10:30 a.m 12:30 p.m.	Writing Revision	July 20, 2010
Lesson 23	Library B	July 28, 2010	10:30 a.m 12:30 p.m.	Sentences	
Lesson 24	Library B	Aug. 17, 2010	11 a.m1 p.m.	Paragraphs	Aug. 14, 2010

 Table 3.12: Adult Learner Case Study: Trisha's Tutoring Sessions

## **Sponsor-Generated Artifacts**

I gathered artifacts from January 2009 until August 2010. I began collecting printed materials from both programs from the first day I met with program administrators. I took copies of fliers and brochures, noted website materials, and asked for any additional materials that programs were willing to share. As nonprofit organizations, both were used to sharing materials that would not be so easily released in private companies, such as enrollment figures, financial budgets, and historical documents. I obtained these documents in hard and electronic copies, and, as far as possible, I digitally scanned and stored paper artifacts (Table 3.13).

County Literacy	<b>Regional Community</b>	Learner Ethnography
	College	
Emails	Emails	Text messages
Website	Website	24 lesson plans
Tutor-Learner Contract	Brochures	Tutoring journal
Tutor training manual and	Fliers	Weekly writing assignments
textbook		and exercises
Copies of Learner magazine	Course Offerings and Class	Daughter's spelling lists
	schedules	
Monthly Learner Progress	GED materials	Trisha's Assessment and
Reports		Profile from County Literacy
	Career Magazine	
Bi-Annual Updates	Year end reports	
Literacy Instructional materials	Grant proposals	
Social events invitations and	Reports to State Adult	
programs	Education Body	
Fundraising print		
advertisements and program		
materials		
Program newsletters		
Tutor Workshop materials		
Annual Reports		
Learner writing samples		

Table 3.13: Chart of Artifacts

While the collection of artifacts from both sites is substantial, the items do not have a central role in the discussion of adult learners and their expectations and understandings of literacy. The artifacts provide valuable background information on the structure and history of programs and sponsor perspectives of adult literacy, but the research project was not established to analyze the literature and publications of individual programs. The focus is on what adult learners have to say. Quite possibly, this material will become central in my future research.

## **Member Checking**

Member checking with sponsors indicated that they were comfortable with my representation of their words. I was able to contact most of the sponsors by email and provide them with extracts from the dissertation in which they were featured, primarily the sponsor descriptions. I wanted to ensure that they felt my descriptions of them were both accurate and fair. I did not submit portions from the analysis chapters because I felt that I would have to include substantial chunks of texts that would still need greater context for sponsors to review adequately. Only Allison suggested a possible change, pointing out that I could clarify the overlap between her part-time work with the College and her full-time high school teaching, and I made that change.

Member checking with learners, however, was more difficult. One of the chief concerns and difficulties of this study was maintaining contact with learners who sometimes seemed to disappear. Katrina, who has taught in her program for 10 years, says that, out a class of 44 students, "I have a quarter to a third who will phase out and not come any more" (Katrina 1.3). Participating in a voluntary interview with a stranger is certainly less important than completing the GED course, so I knew other priorities might reduce my learner population. While only one learner explicitly refused a follow-up interview, I was unable to contact many other learners. A few learners had email addresses that I had used to request interviews, send consent forms, and offer thanks for successful interviews, but they did not respond to my later email requests. Several learners had phone numbers that no longer worked when I called for a follow-up. Some instructors and tutors confirmed that they were no longer meeting with these learners. Others took my phone calls and agreed to talk further, but then no longer answered my calls and texts and did not respond to messages. I eventually stopped calling, not wanting to cross the line between persistence and harassment.

I rely on the eight follow-up interviews as my primary form of learner member checking for this study. Four learners from County and four students from Regional participated in follow-up interviews, which allowed me to clarify comments made by learners in the first interviews and to provide learners the opportunity to offer new information several months after the initial interview. In each follow-up, I recorded highlights from the previous interview and then asked learners questions specific to their responses. Learners confirmed details I had recorded, such as when I asked Todd about his plans for study:

- *Todd:* I'm going to, I'm going to try to do anatomy like the study of human movement and all, and stuff like that.
- *Randy:* Uh-hmm. Because you, do you still want to be a medical examiner?

*Todd:* Yeah. (Todd 2.1)

I also had the opportunity to ask for greater explanation of a detail shared earlier. For example, in her first interview, Jennifer had mentioned her performance with the COMPASS, but we had not covered details about the particular test or her passing score. We were able to talk further about these details in the follow-up interview. Finally, I was able to ask, "Is there anything that you haven't had a chance to say that you would like to say right now?" This provided learners with an opportunity to have the final word and revise or add to their previous comments. No learner offered any additional information to this question.

I also rely on my case study with Trisha as source of verification. The one-on-one tutoring with Trisha was extremely useful in that I was able to learn much about the patterns of one learner, and I was able to share passages from the dissertation with her that I had written about her and receive critical feedback regularly. We wrote two of the passages that describe her together, and she affirmed that the information was accurate and fair. She also approved of the pseudonym that I chose initially when she did not offer one.

#### **Data Analysis**

A grounded theory approach, developing the theory from the data, means that researchers must cast a wide net since the research categories are not predetermined (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Researchers using grounded theory do not seek support for the answer that they wish to confirm. While I began this research with theory-generated codes (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 209), seeking to find data relating to understandings and expectations of literacy, I could not ask participants just two neatly targeted questions and address my research question: *What are your understandings and expectations of literacy held AND How are your understandings and expectations within your programs*? The extended line of questions produced more material to be mined for data than I needed.

This study now includes 50 interview transcripts from over 16 hours of recordings; an 80-page research journal, documenting my research efforts and interactions with participants; 24 lesson plans from a year-long tutoring relationship; a 60-page tutoring journal, reflecting on the tutoring sessions; four notebooks of learner writing; over 500 emails to and from learners and sponsors; and many more artifacts and raw materials. These items comprise a considerable amount of potential data, but not all of them became data that I analyzed for this study.

The process of data collection and preliminary data analysis often directs and shapes the research project, and this study is no exception (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Schatzman & Strauss, 1973). As my ethnographic case study moved into the background, along with its lesson plans and tutoring journal, my interviews with learners conducted between August 2009 and August 2010 became of central importance. Sponsor interviews were important, but only if they were able to provide interpretive material for the learner transcripts. The same was true of the sponsor-generated artifacts. I selected interviews because they offer the clearest and most direct access to discussions of literacy from learners and sponsors. The expectations and understandings learners suggest came through active interviewing, which gives critical attention to their words.

After limiting the primary analysis of the study to the interviews and organizing the transcripts, I moved on to immerse myself in the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). I

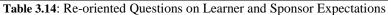
performed broad content analysis on all transcripts, searching for words that might be connected with the key concepts of understanding and expectation such as *definition* and *goal*. This was no quantitative exercise but a preliminary sweep that allowed me to mark passages and examine them for themes and relationships between the themes among groups. The categories were suggested by the key concepts of *understandings* and *expectations*, so that related terms could be studied. Marshall and Rossman (2006) have argued that "the categories should be internally consistent but distinct from one another" (p. 159). This is not to gain some "exhaustive" list but to discover the most "salient, grounded categories" (p. 159). Key terms and categories appeared. For expectations, categories included goals, success, hopes, staying, leaving, and accomplishments. For understandings, categories included definition, literacy, reading, writing, and school experiences.

## **Expectations**

I used a series of questions to conduct my interviews with learners. I later analyzed the transcripts to create the categories of goals, success, hopes, staying, leaving, and accomplishments. I transformed these categories into questions and then coded the interviews, extracting passages that provided answers to these questions on learner expectation. The interview protocols guided my newly formed questions, but I was not limited to them since the interviewees often reshaped the questions. With sponsors, I was interested in their expectations of literacy but more interested in what they perceived to be the learners' expectations.

This re-categorization (Table 3.14) helped me to examine distinct concepts such as goals and success. The category of success was particularly intriguing because learners spoke assertively concerning their decisions to participate. They saw themselves as agents, making decisions that would lead them to accomplish their goals. Learners acknowledged making sacrifices and investing time and energy in order to succeed. Regrouping their responses under newly formed questions allowed me to view them as active investors who use the resources they do have in order to gain the literacy resources they do not have.

Learner Expectations		Sponsor Expectations	
1.	What brought you here?	1.	What are your impressions of learners?
2.	What made you stay?	2.	What do learners say they join the
3.	What made you leave?		program?
4.	What goals/ expectations did you come	3.	What do learners want from you?
	with?	4.	Who is most successful?
5.	What created those expectations?	5.	What is attendance like?
6.	What success have you had in the program?	6.	What are some of the obstacles to success?
7.	How does one succeed? What leads one to success?		
8.	How do you feel about your success?		
9.	What can hamper success or		
	accomplishing your goals?		
10.	What are your short term goals?		
11.	What are you long term goals?		



For example, Bruce's responses to various questions, when reorganized under the new questions "How does one succeed? What leads to success?" begins to tell the story of a thoughtful and motivated learner (Table 3.15). His expectations have been influenced by his auntie's words "if you want something out of life, you have to go for it" (Bruce 1.13) and her interventions, as when she organizes a tutor (Bruce 1.5). He has set high goals for himself (Bruce 1.10), and he believes his success is contingent upon his determination (Bruce 2.3-4). He offers his personal beliefs as a road map for anyone interested in success: "I still believe like if you can have determination, you can do it. . . . If you have it in your mind, you can do it. You've just got to put your foot forward" (Bruce 1.6). Grouping his responses in this way, originally spread out over two interviews, shows that he has invested carefully and deliberately in his success with the support of his auntie.

Name	How does one succeed? What leads one to success?	My Comments
Bruce	He has a private tutor that his auntie arranged (Bruce 1.5).	A man from church.
	"That's about it and uh, the thing of it, it's um, I still believe like if you can have determination, you can do it If you have it in your mind, you can do it. You've just got to put your foot forward" (Bruce 1.6).	He links success to determination. Your mind still depends on you taking action. He places the responsibility in the learner.
	"Yes, so that is uh, I understand it's a very high goal, but I like to set high goals for myself" (Bruce 1.10).	He wants to aim for the sky. He sets high goals.
	"I know it's coming so and just my goals, focusing on my goals, it gets me motivate to get up and come" (Bruce 1.13).	He keeps his eyes on the prize. Focusing on goals gets him motivated.
	"Oh, not really. Well it is one thing. Like I, like say, my auntie always told me; if you want something out of life, you have to go for it If you just sit back and don't do it, you're nothing" (Bruce 1.13).	He ends with these words. It has a positive statement coupled with a warning.
	"Well so far, one thing for success, my determination I'm very determined to get what, what's coming. I, it's been a long, bumpy ride and I believe through everything I went through, so far, I'm being successful and it's just the, the plans down the line, I try to make plans, like one, one thing at a time .because if I focus too far ahead .something's going to mess up. And I don't want that to happen so I'm just focusing on like just one thing. And that makes me successful any way I go because of my mind- frame" (Bruce 2.3-4).	He maintains the sense of optimism and determination that he expressed in his first interview.
	"Long as I, I feel that I can do better or I can do good at things and I can succeed, it's, that's basically, I've succeeded right there" (Bruce 2.4).	

 Table 3.15: Regional Learners on Success (Bruce)

After examining the other learners using this same method, I put forward the metaphor of *learner literacy investment* (see Chapter 5). I reviewed the transcripts and saw multiple ways that the behavior of learners (as explained in their own words) could be compared with the actions of financial investors. This led me to another round of thematic analysis, focusing on categories like benefit, success, decision-making, and value, which generated the following questions:

- 1. What dividends/ benefits have you received already?
- 2. What decisions have you made that delayed or interrupted a traditional track to success?
- 3. What decisions have you made to move you toward success and achievement?
- 4. What positive mindset do you have?
- 5. What kind of goals are you investing in?
- 6. How do they keep or fire tutors/ instructors?
- 7. What factors did you have in mind when choosing the program?

Using these new categories, I was able to examine learner participation from a new perspective and present them as investors who employ sponsors as brokers in order to increase their literacy resources.

#### Understandings

I used a similar pattern in analyzing learner and sponsor understandings of literacy. I began with grouping their understandings into categories, including definition, literacy, reading, writing, and school experiences. Again, the interview protocols were foundational, but I relied on the participant responses to reveal newly formed questions. I read the transcripts of sponsors for their perceptions of learners' understandings as well as their own understandings. Table 3.16 lists the questions used for analysis of understandings for both learners and sponsors:

Learner Understandings		Sponsor Understandings	
1.	What comes to mind when you hear the word	1.	What comes to mind when you hear
	literacy?		the word <i>literacy</i> ?
2.	What were your experiences/ struggles with	2.	How do your learners define literacy?
	reading and writing?	3.	What goals did learners have relating
3.	How do you feel about reading and writing?		to reading and writing?
4.	What kinds of reading and writing do you do?	4.	What goals did you (sponsors/ tutors)
5.	How important is reading and writing?		have relating to reading and writing?
6.	What goals relate to reading and writing?	5.	What do you think about reading and
7.	What was school like for you?		writing?

Table 3.16: Re-oriented Questions on Learner and Sponsor Understandings

Because the term *literacy* is such a significant and disputed term, I began with a close look at the question I asked all participants: "What comes to mind when you hear the word *literacy*?" I extracted the responses to this question for each site (Table 3.17).

Learners	Responses				
Leonard	"The word literacy, what do that? I can only give you what I think what,				
	what it, what it, what it's telling me is learning Literacy I don't, I, the word				
	literacy, I'm not sure what it mean, but I'm taking it as learning Teaching				
	something that teaching me. Something that maybe you know what it meant but				
	I don't ( <i>chuckles</i> ) really know what the word 'literacy'' mean, but I'm looking at it as learning, but maybe you can tall me what it mean "(I concred 1 20)				
	it as learning, but maybe you can tell me what it mean." (Leonard 1.20)				
Daron	"You know, I never even knew that word existed until I started with County				
	Literacy. I never knew what literacy meant So that, that's where I started at				
	five years ago. I never heard of the word before. Literacy? What's literacy				
	mean? So it's, it's just amazing and I have learned that every individual that				
	has a problem with literacy, basically works out their own technique how to				
G 1	survive in life" (Daron 1.18).				
Catlyn	"I would say (pause) I really don't know. It, it, when literacy comes up, it just,				
Calar	I, it's just a blank it seems like a normal word to me" (Catlyn 1.5).				
Colyn	"I'm thinking reading				
	could be reading, math, just certain things you're slow at" (Colyn1 13).				
	"You know, literacy is such a big, sophisticated word, that we, that I hear a lot But you know, whatever it is literacy or something, we could have been saving				
	. But you know, whatever it is, literacy or something, we could have been saying handicap" (Colyn 1.14).				
Vaughn	"Just reading and writing. I really hadn't thought of it much" (Vaughn 1.8).				
Jennifer	"I just don't know because I don't know what the word "literacy", I did, I don't				
Jemmer	have no insight of literacy. I, sometimes people, literacy means you're, you're				
	dumb or you can't do this" (Jennifer 1.13).				
Thaddeus	"When I first heard of it, it's people that couldn't read I think it's just people				
	that need help. A little extra help" (Thaddeus 1.7).				
Antoinette	"Mm, somebody that needs help. Somebody who is incapable of doing things				
	on their own and they really need somebody else to show them how to do it, be				
	directed the right way. [Pauses] I think that's it" (Antoinette 1.6).				

Sponsors	Responses
Amanda	"To me it means being able to read and writeand all the things that go along with that. Like not only just being able to read the words, but read things that are meaningful to you or that um give yourself enjoyment or information or that kind of thing that, and that you can, that you can read well enough to gain that from the stuff that you read I guess it's beyond just being able to know that these, you know, what these words are and but to do, do something more with
	that" (Amanda 1.14).
Rosa	"Literacy to me used to just mean being able to read something but now it's so much more So literacy is not just reading any more or being able to write a sentence like I thought it was and maybe like getting by. It's experiences too." (Rosa 1.9).
Violet	"I think ability to read. It would be what, what comes to my mind." (Violet 1.10).
Abigail	"Well these days ( <i>laughs</i> ) these days, what comes to mind is people who cannot, who not have literacy" (Abigail 1.13).
Brian	"Hm. Freedom. Freedom would be my word because I see you know the shackles of illiteracy all the time" (Brian 1.12).
Michelle	"Um, what come to mind for me is reading, writing and English as a second language. And the reason for that is, it's the, that's sort of the definition of community literacy right now I expect that definition will change actually, and in three years, if I'm still involved in this field, I'll be thinking of it as reading, writing, English as a second language and math, and numeracy, .because there's a trend to go towards that" (Michelle 1.7).
<b>T</b> 11 2 4 <b>F</b> C	1. Secause there's a trend to go towards that (whenene 1.7).

Table 3.17: County Literacy: What Does Literacy Mean to You?

I immediately noticed a stark contrast between the meanings that learners and sponsors held, as well as the difference between sponsors' impressions of learners' familiarity and what their responses revealed. Sponsors did not believe that learners were familiar with the word or concept, and some learners matched that belief. However, many did have understandings that they were able to share, and I noted two basic categories for their understandings: negative and positive. Some learners and sponsors focused on illiteracy and other deficit language, while others had positive associations such as learning and reading.

This easy binary, however, appeared too simplistic and did not show the real complexity of learners' responses. I re-examined all responses to this question and brought responses relating to reading and writing into the analysis, reasoning that if learners and sponsors were referencing reading and writing when offering their understandings of literacy, then any discussion they had around these practices might be part of their understanding (Table 3.18).

Name	How do you feel about reading and writing?	My Comments
Vaughn	"So now that I have a better understanding and I like to read more and I like to write more. And now that I know how to punctuate after I	He has seen improvement with the tutoring
Jennifer	write, it's pretty nice, so" (Vaughn1 2). "But see, reading helps, I learned reading was the key, so that's why I'm putting most of, that's why it's mostly that I'm looking highly at my reading for education purposes" (Jennifer 1.5).	Reading is the key, but for what lock? It is key for education purposes. Nothing else?
Thaddeus	<ul> <li><i>Randy:</i> Okay. What was English class like for you? Reading and writing and those sorts of things?</li> <li><i>Thaddeus:</i> I didn't too much care for it, long as I passed, I didn't too much care for it. (Thaddeus 1.6).</li> </ul>	In high school, they were not important. He just wanted to get by.
Antoinette	<ul> <li>"yeah the writing and the reading is hard for me." (Antoinette 1.5)</li> <li>"Reading. Writing. One of my biggest challenges is reading and writing. If it's not something with pictures or somebody showing me how to do it, it's hard for me to really understand itso if it's being showed to me or told to me in directions, then I can do it, but if it's written down on a piece of paper, I might look at it and try to understand it, but if I don't get it, then I'd be like, Okay, well can you explain this to me?" (Antoinette 1.7).</li> </ul>	I had asked what seemed hardest about her GED program. She has a hard time with independent reading. She needs help with decoding and comprehension. She recognizes her need for help.

Table 3.18: County Learners on Reading and Writing

As I examined the ways that both groups talked about literacy, it became apparent that both sponsors and learners had ways of reflecting upon and analyzing their understandings of literacy, a *literacy meta-discourse* (See Chapter 6). Sponsors did not believe that learners thought about literacy or could even engage in a discussion about literacy, but my conversations with learners showed that they could with varying degrees of sophistication.

# Conclusion

I designed this exploratory, qualitative study to investigate the expectations and understandings that adult learners have of literacy programs, prompted by the concern that many sponsors have raised about uneven learner participation patterns and behaviors. By attending closely to the responses of learners and sponsors in interviews, I have been able to document and analyze learners' impressions of literacy and sponsors' impressions of learners. Using thematic analysis, I have been able to produce categories and formulate new questions that reorganize responses so that they reveal expectations and understandings not readily apparent in the linear representation of their transcripts. This analysis suggests that learners are involved in and committed to literacy investment, and that they have complex ways of thinking about literacy.

The data itself has been a powerful force in the shaping of the methods and ultimately the results of this study. While I had ideas about what materials would be most important and what approaches would yield the best results, I found myself being challenged to rethink and reshape my perspective throughout the process. The substantial collection of data from the adult learner in my ethnographic case study became less pronounced and adjusted comfortably in the company of the data from the other learners. Interviews with sponsors changed from being a primary source of data into a supplementary source. The interview questions provided responses that demanded me to ask new questions. Ultimately, I feel that the voices of the learner demanded a place of prominence that the methodology now acknowledges.

## Chapter 4

## **Learner Descriptions**

## Introduction

In the previous chapter, I presented the methods for my research, describing its process and evolution. That chapter focused on the question "How did I conduct the research?" In this chapter, I focus on the question "Who are the participants?" and offer some short but detailed descriptions of the learners who participated in the project. While there are a few examples of research that give careful attention to the lives of adult learners, I feel that most studies and reports, especially from federal sponsors, do not give enough time and space to learners' stories. Retention and attrition percentages and attendance records mask the humans behind those numbers. Sponsors' descriptions, which I consider less central to the work of this study, appear in footnotes in chapters where they are referenced.

This chapter, therefore, performs a number of functions. First, it provides a more robust picture of the circumstances and attributes of the adult learners. The learners have names (pseudonyms), not simply numbers, and I have chosen to use first names to create a greater sense of intimacy. I choose details that I believe offer glimpses into the personalities and motivations of the learners. Second, the descriptions target learner expectations and understandings, which relate to the findings within the following chapters. Concepts of learner literacy investment and literacy meta-discourse will be more salient after reading this chapter and recognizing the ways these concepts relate to learners' stories. Third, learner descriptions appear here, rather than embedded in the previous chapter, as an aid to readers. While I do not expect readers to remember the full descriptions of all 19 learners (including Trisha), removing them from the methodology places them in a less crowded space and allows readers to return to this chapter quickly for reference. Finally, this brief but important set of descriptions re-affirms my

commitment to provide greater voice to adult literacy learners and to make their lives central to the discussion of adult literacy.

I debated multiple ways of organizing the learners' stories, both individually and within the context of each other, before deciding on the current structure. In each account, I present a learner, first offering some background information and profile details relating to race, gender, family, and interests. Then, I move on to discuss experiences with the current program as well as past literacy experiences, in particular, high school. Each description ends with a look toward future plans. While I have tried to keep each description two to three paragraphs long, the lengths do vary based on the number of details learners offered during the interviews.

Although writing the stories was fairly straightforward, organizing the order of the stories has been more complicated. I did not want to suggest that the linear order of accounts indicated degrees of importance, nor did I want a purely random order that might work against helping readers to remember personalities and details. An earlier version included working with categories such as grouping single mothers or those with college aspirations, but this often created outliers who did not fit neatly into categories. Finally, I decided to group learners according to their sites, placing them within alphabetical order in each. While this creates a list of sorts, I feel that it provides equitable attention to each learner and will aid readers in remembering more details and forming stronger impressions of learners.

While I recognize that the descriptions I have included are highly selective and have been shaped by my own perspective, I feel that they do present fair and useful portraits of the lives of the adult learners in this study, without stereotyping adult learners. My arrangement gives readers access to the full array of differences among participants. To include full transcripts of each learner would provide more of their words but would offer readers no guidance or frame for understanding the interviews. When possible, I have included words of the learners in order to represent their voices. I have endeavored to show their lives through their eyes and words, in the hopes of validating their experiences and perspectives in the work of adult literacy education.

## **County Literacy Learners**

Antoinette is an African American mother of two children (13 years old and 6 years old) who declined to give her exact age for the interview. She is living in the county but was born in a bordering mid-western state. She plans to obtain her high school diploma or her GED qualification and to pursue a Child Development Associate credential to open her own preschool. Currently, she works at a Montessori school with infants.

Antoinette remembers high school as a difficult time. She was assigned to ADHD classes, and she had outside concerns including her pregnancy and caring for her ill grandmother. She left high school in tenth grade when she was 16 or 17. She feels ready to tackle her GED course, although she acknowledges that the work is difficult.

**Catlyn** is a 20-year old white American female. She agreed to meet with me only after negotiations with her tutor and her mother, and a formal introduction from her tutor. She is from the area and enjoys watching movies and hanging out with her friends. As a teenager, Catlyn was part of an independent special education program that worked with her high school. She studied reading, writing, and math in the special program, but she took other courses, such as science and band, at the high school.

Catlyn joined County Literacy in order to improve her reading and writing so she could enter college-level classes at Regional and begin the Culinary Arts program. She has been with her tutor for approximately a year and is enrolled at Regional Community College. She was completing a basic writing course when we first met, and after our second interview, she successfully entered college-level classes at Regional in fall 2010. Catlyn plans to work out of her home before starting up her own bakery business after completing college.

**Colyn** is a 37-year old African American male who was born in New York but moved to the county when he was 12 years old. He was raised by his single mother who left his father because "she couldn't rely on him anymore" (Colyn 1.1). When he was younger, Colyn says he got into a "little mischief" (Colyn 1.1). He has a high school diploma, although he does not feel proud of it. Colyn has had a number of jobs after high school but never settled into a career. He is very interested in business and marketing, and he wants to run his own business one day.

Colyn's attempts to complete classes at Regional Community College were unsuccessful. A specialist diagnosed him with a learning disorder many years ago, which resulted in a referral to County Literacy program. He started the program in 1993 and worked with three tutors over the next ten years before dropping out to pursue training as a truck driver. Colyn did not complete his training because he lacked the mechanical knowledge and skills required. At the end of 2009, he returned to County Literacy to improve his reading and communication skills, and the program assigned a tutor in March 2010. He has only praise for the program but admits that he does not mention it to his friends, though he has spoken about it with his mother.

**Daron** is a 49-year old white American male who was unemployed at the time of our interviews and had been pursuing a number of certification courses at Regional Community College for the past two years. He was born in the county and was a team leader in the shipping and receiving division of a manufacturing company before being laid off a couple of years ago when his company moved overseas. Daron confesses that he has worked full time, 12 hours a day, seven days a week for 29 years, always for the benefit of others, like his ex-wife and ex-girlfriends whom he supported financially with their educations. Daron says that he is ready to do something for himself, and learning to read and write has become his passion. A phone call from his sister provided him with the number of County Literacy, where he began work with a tutor before being laid off.

Although he graduated from high school, Daron has struggled with reading, writing, and mathematics. He hired private tutors, worked with the program, and studied with his new wife to improve his skills. He was assessed by a psychologist at Regional, who documented his dyslexia, short term memory difficulties, and learning disabilities. His spelling is phonetic, and Daron says others find it challenging to read unedited, but he feels well-supported by Regional's academic services. His counselor helped admit him to classes for which he did not qualify based on his performance on entrance exams.

County Literacy often promotes Daron as a success story, and he has been prominently featured in its public relations campaigns, both in printed articles and in personal appearances at fundraising events. He believes that he will be successful when he gets that "good" job, and he is prepared "to start at the bottom, hard labor, janitor, whatever it takes" (Daron 1.9) in order to work his way up to a chief maintenance man in

a university or company. Daron has already earned two construction certificates through Regional. He told me that passing the written test for his driver's license was a high point in his life: "I was like a kid again. This is awesome" (Daron 1.15).

**Jennifer** is a 34-year old African American single mother of a 13-year old son. She is from the county, and her hobbies include sports such as basketball and volleyball. Her main goals are to improve her reading and to provide support for her son's education. She has worked for a janitorial service for the last eight years, but she plans to own her own janitorial business one day.

Jennifer dropped out of high school just over 15 years ago, and she attempted to get her high school completion certification two years after leaving but was not successful. Eleven years later, she tried again and discovered she was only a half a credit away from her diploma, so she took the computer class and received her diploma.

Jennifer joined County Literacy when she realized she needed additional help with her college work. She had worked with a County Literacy tutor six years ago, but it had not been a successful relationship. She went back a year ago and likes her current tutor, meeting three hours a week even though the program requires only two hours. She has noticed the improvement in her reading and in her scores on the COMPASS (Computer-adaptive Placement, Assessment, and Support System).<sup>48</sup>

Leonard is a 50-year old African American male, born in a nearby city, who moved to this county to be closer to his job. He works as a stock picker, collecting and storing stock in an automotive plant. Leonard is married with three daughters and identifies as a family man. He meets weekly with his tutor to work on improving his reading skills. Leonard has been a part of County Literacy for almost ten years but participated in another program when he was 35 years old. He has had at least three tutors in this program, and the most recent is a tutor he started with two years ago. Sometimes the weekly meetings are postponed because of Leonard's family commitments and overtime work.

Leonard does not fondly remember his school days, and he says that he "was pushed behind in school" (Leonard 1.1) when he was younger. He left when he was 16

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> "COMPASS is an untimed, computerized test that helps your college evaluate your skills and place you into appropriate courses. COMPASS offers tests in reading, writing, math, writing essay, and English as a Second Language (ESL)." http://www.act.org/compass/student/index.html

years old and in sixth grade. After the birth of his first child, he took an "inventory" of his life and decided to give attention to literacy. Furthermore, he became a church-goer and felt he was missing out on the experience because others could read and he could not. Leonard had tried night school before that, but he did not fit in with his teenaged classmates and felt ashamed that he was so much older.

Completing a GED certification, going back to school, and finding another job are not priorities for Leonard since he has been employed for 30 years in the same company and looks forward to retirement and the company's benefits package. Instead, he takes pride in other literacy accomplishments. He is particularly proud of the two letters that he has written to recent U.S presidents. The letters were based on science articles he had read. Although he did not receive a reply from President George W. Bush, he proudly showed me the response that he received from President Barack Obama.

**Thaddeus** is a 34-year old African American who was born in a nearby city and moved to the county. He is the father of a four-year old daughter and a musician who plays bass guitar, saxophone, and drums. One of his goals is to be able to read to his daughter. Thaddeus graduated from high school with his diploma, but he does not feel he deserved it. He had special education classes through middle and high school, but he feels that he did not benefit greatly from them.

Thaddeus wanted to attend Regional Community College, but he failed the entrance exam and a counselor recommended him to County Literacy. He has been working with his current tutor for about a month, although he had two tutors previously, each lasting for about three months. Their relationships were brief because Thaddeus felt that his goals were not being attended to, and so he ended the tutoring. Thaddeus plans to study culinary arts, but he is not sure of the kind of job he wants in the future.

**Trisha** is a 39-year old white American female. County Literacy paired us on August 6, 2009. She is the mother of a seven-year old daughter and an 18-year old son, and she was in the process of a divorce when we met. Trisha found herself needing to work again outside of the home, after she had given up her job at the request of her husband almost eight years ago. Prior to becoming a stay-at-home Mom, she had steady employment in both a nursing home and a retail chain store. Although Trisha graduated from high school in 1988, County Literacy assessed her as an intermediate reader who

was afraid of writing. The learning notes provided by the program indicate that she had trouble using phonics but that her sight word knowledge was "pretty big." Trisha and I met for the first time on August 26, 2009 and worked together for this case study until August 2010.

Trisha has a large extended family, and she has Native American heritage through her father's father, who was Cherokee. She is the middle child between two brothers. Her parents divorced when she was very young (10 or 11), and each of them remarried. Her mother and stepfather did not have any children together, but he had children of his own from a previous relationship; her mother's new family lives in a nearby state. Her father and stepmother had three daughters, and they are now 19, 17, and 13 years old. Her stepmother also had a daughter before she married Trisha's father, and her father's family lives in Trisha's state. Trisha calls the four daughters her sisters and feels close to them.

School was a difficult place for Trisha. She remembers being afraid of speaking and expressing herself. Trisha should have graduated in 1987 but did not graduate until 1988 because she repeated second grade. She remembers her classmate informing her that she was being held back but does not recall the teacher telling her. Trisha remembers having a hard time with her schoolwork in elementary school but says that her friends often helped her. She says that help was usually them telling her the answers. In high school, she received extra help from the special education teachers. She says that she was sorry she did not stay an extra year instead of graduating. No one had suggested it to her, but she thinks she could have improved if she had stayed.<sup>49</sup>

**Vaughn** is a "hyper, outgoing" (Vaughn 1.10) 19-year old white American male whom I met late in the interview process. He has been working with County Literacy while completing an automotive program at Regional Community College. Vaughn has been diagnosed with ADD (but is not on medication) and is dyslexic; he uses the term "learning disability" without any apparent anxiety (Vaughn 1.4). Because Vaughn needs noise and distraction in order to focus, he and his tutor meet for his sessions in the food court area.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Trisha reviewed and helped revise her own learner description. See Appendix H for a biographical story she wrote during our tutoring sessions.

Vaughn found out about County Literacy through Regional. Although he graduated from high school, he did not score well on the entrance tests and was sent to a counselor and Learning Support who connected him with County Literacy. He knew nothing about the program before signing on, and after working with his tutor, he was able to gain entry into Regional Community College. He has been with his tutor for a year and half.

Vaughn plans to finish his college program in two years and then transfer to earn a business degree at a nearby university. He is working a 40-hour week at an automotive shop, and he plans to own his own business after becoming a certified mechanic. In the spring semester, Vaughn hopes to do some courses while working, but he will not have time for tutoring until the fall.

#### **Regional Community College Learners**

**Bethany** is a 21-year old white American female from the area who is a single mother of a four-year old son. She joined this GED program at Regional upon the recommendation of a social services worker, and she hopes she will be able to transition into college classes. She happily recommends the program to her friends and family.

Bethany does not remember high school fondly. She says, "There was so much drama in high school that you, it took your concentration away from your work" (Bethany 1.9). She left high school when she became pregnant and later joined an adult education program. Bethany became a certified medical assistant, but she could not find work because she does not have a high school diploma. Employers told her that she needed the GED certification to gain employment. When she was in the previous program, she did attempt all five tests and passed three. She plans to do all parts again to improve her scores.

She joined the program in January 2010, and by mid-February, she was ready to take three of the tests, having performed well on practice tests. Bethany hopes to pursue a career in the medical field, perhaps becoming a registered nurse or a doctor. She plans to work and take courses together but eventually switch to full-time schooling.

**Bruce** is a 33-year old African American male from a nearby city who enjoys working on cars. He helps to care for his uncle who has suffered a stroke, and considers

himself a good reader and writer. Bruce learned about the GED program at Regional through his "auntie" and began the program in January.

Bruce wants to further his education, but he had a difficult time in high school. He was expelled from school for fighting when he was 17, and he places the blame on himself. While he was in school, English class was "great," but he lost interest in school and felt that the teachers were not interested in him. After being expelled, he apprenticed with a cousin in auto mechanics for over five years and still works with him.

At the time of our first interview, Bruce planned to be finished by the end of May, in order to register for summer courses at Regional. He had passed four components in another program in 2008, leaving only math to complete. Between our two interviews, he passed his math, but he decided to redo some components to improve his overall score to qualify for his certificate. Bruce plans to go on to college and study to become a chemistry teacher or an auto technician, but he says that teaching chemistry is his greater passion.

**Devin** is a 22-year old African American male from the area who enjoys poetry and music. He was recently released from prison where he had participated in GED programs, but he had been unable to finish because he was moved from one prison to the next frequently. Still, he passed two tests while incarcerated.

Devin left high school at 14 or 15 after his father passed away, and he "went down the wrong path" (Devin 1.5). Before he dropped out he was doing quite well, and he remembers English as his strongest subject. At the time of our interview, he had passed four testing components and planned to take the math test in about three weeks. I learned later from a phone call that he earned his GED at the end of the semester and enrolled in college courses at Regional.

Devin hopes to get a maintenance job while doing courses, and he wants an associate's degree in business management and a certificate in music engineering. He is unsure if he wants to pursue any other higher degrees. In ten years' time, he imagines owning a trucking company.

**Julian** is a 36-year old African American male who was born and raised in Louisiana. He enjoys video gaming and the Internet as well as spending time with his nieces and nephews. Julian joined the GED program in September 2009 after his

girlfriend told him about it. She completed the program before entering mainstream college classes at Regional, and he now feels mentally ready to do the GED certification. He says, "I want to get that monkey off my back" (Julian 1.6).

Julian is bothered that he does not have a high school diploma, and he attributes his lack of completion to his family situation. He spent his first three years in school in Louisiana and the next three in another state before moving back to Louisiana. His mother and siblings then moved back away, leaving him with relatives that he feels did not support his schooling very well. Even without a diploma, Julian has been able to have a number of good paying jobs in management positions. However, he remembers employers denying many jobs because he had no certification.

When we met, Julian had already passed four of the five tests, and math was the only one remaining. He plans to pass that in time to enroll in college classes in January to study welding, although he is not sure what that course entails. His decision to learn welding is based on his experiences on an oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico in 2008 where he worked in the kitchen, but he admired the work on the rig. He feels this program is the way to get him working as a welder on an oil rig.

**Maria** is a 30-year old white American mother of two boys, 13 and 8 years old. She is from the area, and says she was encouraged by Renee (who I also interviewed) to join the GED program. Also, she is motivated by the example she wants to set for her children and the desire for a "decent paying job" (Maria 1.3). She is married and primarily a stay-at-home mother who cleans an office to help provide rent money for her family.

Maria did not leave school because she was struggling academically, but she dropped out of high school at the age of 17 when she became pregnant. The school she attended had no provision for student-mothers, and she did not know of any other option but to leave. She says that school was fun for her and that she was performing well before leaving.

Maria joined the program in September and plans to be done in one semester. When I met her, she had passed one of the test components and was planning to take two more the following week. She is saving math and writing for the last because she feels they would be harder than the rest. Her short term goals are to obtain her driver's license

and pursue nursing and pediatrics; her long-term goal is to work for the university hospital.

**Rachel** is a 31-year old white American female from the area. She has a sevenyear old son and says she is very close to her family. She deals with epilepsy and struggles with learning when she has seizures. Her latest medication has been effective in controlling her seizures, and she feels she is making steady progress. Rachel is interested in the medical field and has been investigating the requirements for becoming an ultrasound technician.

High school was not a bad experience, but Rachel left high school 12 years ago to help care for her invalid grandmother. She decided to get her GED certification after hearing about it through a social service agency. Her motivation for joining the program was to make a better life for her family and son. She also wants a better job that will provide financially for her family and her wedding.

At the time of our first interview, after just one month in the program, Rachel had passed three of the five tests. She still had reading and math to complete. At the time of our follow-up interview, about three months later, she had earned her GED certification, enrolled in college courses, and was about to marry.

**Renee** is a 25-year old white American single mother who joined the GED course in the summer and continued the program into the fall. She is from the area and spends most of her time with her children. At the time of her interview, she was unemployed, and she is "just trying to get my GED so I can move on with my life" (Renee 1.1). She has passed four of the five testing components with only the math exam remaining.

Renee left high school when she was in tenth grade, only 16 or 17 years old. She puts the blame on herself and says that she hated going to school, preferring to hang out with her friends. Her nephew told her about the GED program at Regional after he participated in the program. She loves the program and says, "I feel like I'm doing something with myself and, you know what I mean, it makes me feel like something, I guess" (Renee 1.4). Renee actively recruited three friends to join the program, and they carpool each week to classes.

After completing this course, Renee wants to enter college level courses at Regional. She chose this program specifically because she understood that the counselors

would help her to enroll and secure financial aid. She plans to study physical therapy, although she is not sure about her long-term goals.

**Sarah** is a 28-year old Hispanic American (El Salvador) mother who enjoys dancing, reading, and spending time with her two children, eight years old and one year old. She is from the area and returned to the GED program that she had left a couple of years ago, hoping this would lead to a "decent job" (Sarah 1.2). Her past jobs include work in fast food restaurants and hotels.

Sarah left high school because of unspecified problems at home which resulted in her leaving home and school when she was in eighth grade. She joined this program a few years ago and then dropped out, pressured to do so by her ex-husband, but she returned recently with the support of her current husband. Although Sarah has not taken any of the official test components yet, she has done well on practice tests and planned to take her reading test the week following our interview.

Sarah is interested in a career in translation, and is fluent in Spanish. She is already assisting her husband's friends with translation in English-speaking environments. Sarah has also considered becoming a certified nurse's assistant (CNA), caring for the elderly. She is enrolled at Regional to begin college courses in the spring semester.

Shania is a white 38-year old single mother who likes to work out and read. She has three older teenagers, ages 17, 18, and 19. She began the program in September 2009 and had not attempted any literacy program prior to this one. On the day of our interview, Shania was about to take her final test, and she had an interview with Phoenix University set for later in the week. When we met for her follow-up interview in May 2010, she had successfully completed the GED certification as well as five college courses through Phoenix.

Shania dropped out of school in the tenth grade. Reading and writing were not real difficulties for her, but she missed a lot of school in her sophomore year, and she says that she gave too much time and attention to social activities, causing her to fall behind in her schoolwork. She dropped out and then became pregnant two years later. Because Shania spent most of her adult life raising her kids and working two jobs, she was not able to return to school.

Shania worked for an automotive company for 14 years in management before it went out of business and was purchased by another company. The new owners did not insist that she get her GED certification, but she feels they indicated that she would be a better employee if she did. This is the only GED program she investigated, and she wants to be in a classroom setting. She does note that most of the other attendees are a lot younger than she is. Shania finds the classes helpful and exciting, but she has told only her children and close family about the course. She did inform her employer when she passed, and she has told everyone about her success with her college classes through Phoenix.

**Todd** is a 20-year old white American male who began participating in the fall GED program in late September and passed all five components by the first week of November. He likes to read science fiction and play video games, and he works part-time as a cleaner. Todd plans to continue his studies in order to become a medical examiner which would take him another 12 years of tertiary education.

When he was in high school, Todd struggled with anxiety and social awkwardness, and these issues may have contributed to him leaving high school just three months before the end of his senior year. He is currently taking medication for anxiety, and he says that it helps him focus on his studies. After he left school, he tried a state job placement service but says that he did not feel they were interested in him because he was white. He also feels frustrated by the number of interviews required without seeing any prospects for work. Without a high school diploma or GED certification, he does not qualify for many jobs.

Todd says he joined the GED program because his father threatened, saying, "If you don't go through with this I'm kicking you out" (Todd 1.3). He chose Regional Community College because of proximity, and he relies on his father for transportation. Todd did not plan to start college classes at Regional in the winter semester because his father does not like driving in the snow. This is not his first time in the program; Todd attempted this program twice before, taking sections that met earlier in the day, but he says that he just could not wake up in time to attend. After moving to an evening section with his younger brother, they both earned their certification in less than one month. He

says that when he first took the practice tests he was only a few points away from passing, and he feels he could have passed the tests even without the class.

# Conclusion

In this chapter, I provided descriptions of the 19 adult learners, sharing details of their early education experiences, their decisions to join literacy programs, and their goals for the near and distant futures. The individual and collective accounts show strategic agents, actively involved in the pursuit of literacy. They take risks, pool resources, borrow and sacrifice time from home responsibilities to put towards tutoring and classes, manipulate their work schedules to suit their programs, and use people in their contact circles to find ways to participate. While their stories reveal that they are not always successful in meeting their own goals or the goals of the program in a single episode or a set time, these descriptions do show resolve and persistence that is often overlooked when sponsors examine participation.

## Chapter 5

### **Learner Literacy Investment**

## Introduction

In this chapter, I focus on the economic metaphor that has often informed the work of adult literacy. For many years, the federal government and other sponsors have represented themselves as investors. One need look no further than the titles of legislation such as The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 to see the ways in which sponsors officially associate adult literacy with economic investment. However, I argue for a new look at the investment metaphor, viewing capital and motivation from the perspective of adult learners. Representing learners as resourceful investors highlights the complexity of their decision-making processes when joining and continuing their participation in adult literacy programs and suggests a change in the represented roles of sponsors in adult literacy programming. Their words challenge the simple explanations for their participation that are prevalent among sponsors.

Studies of adult literacy programs often examine participation behaviors of adult literacy learners<sup>50</sup> in ABE and GED programs through the perspectives of sponsors. This approach gives sponsors responsibility and agency for the ways literacy is defined and delivered. It has the consequence of distancing learners from active involvement in the meta-discussions of literacy and from shaping the delivery of literacy instruction. Using this perspective, sponsors define learner commitment according to attendance, reading level progress, and adherence to program goals and guidelines; these actions are the extent of learners' expected participation. Because sponsors use their own understandings of literacy, attendance, progress, commitment, and success (and expect learners to use them), they interpret some of the actions and attitudes of learners in particular ways that

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> I use the term *learners* to refer to all adult literacy learning participants. County refers to adult participants as *learners* while Regional uses the term *students*. I use the term *students* only when I am referring specifically to an adult participant in Regional's program.

complicate and potentially impede literacy teaching and learning. For example, sponsors may judge those who miss appointments or classes according to standards set by the program, so that missing two classes might be seen as acceptable, but missing three is grounds for removal. Learners might think about absenteeism using very different standards.

My research suggests that an alternate perspective that sees learners<sup>51</sup> as active investors in their literacy learning, based on their own descriptions of their behaviors, is as viable as sponsor interpretations and may be useful in improving response to the needs and goals of both sponsors and learners. A perspective that interprets the decisionmaking and participation patterns of learners as agentive suggests that sponsors need to change the ways they deliver literacy instruction and conceptualize learners. I call this fresh perspective *learner literacy investment*, which I define as the learner's process of assessing and committing to literacy goals and to sponsors with the resources (such as time, finances, effort, and energy), risks, and sacrifices necessary to achieve them.

This perspective is generated by the findings of this study, and it complicates some of the typical stories told by sponsors about learner behavior. First, learners do not join and participate because of single, dramatic triggering events such as job loss, but they act based on a complex combination of factors, and sponsors must account for these factors collectively to connect well with learners. Second, sponsors are not the central characters, as is often suggested with concepts like *retention* and *attrition*, which are sponsor-centered terms that are no longer applicable if learners are seen as active investors rather than passive participants. Finally, learners stay, leave, and modify participation behavior, not accidentally or indifferently, but deliberately. Learners evaluate resources and make decisions that they feel are best for them at a given moment, upon entry and at multiple points in their literacy learning. They modify their behavior based on re-assessment of their current situations, not on whims.

Seeing learners as investors does not discount the important role of sponsors nor does it suggest that all decisions made by learners are ultimately well-informed and unproblematic. Investors make bad investments regularly based on incorrect information,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> I am only thinking about adult literacy learners here and not all literacy learners, such as children learning to read and write. While I am not suggesting that children do not have agency, they cannot make adult decisions relating to literacy learning such as what programs to attend or when to leave programs.

poor risk management, and sometimes blind faith. The reality of bad investments emphasizes the importance of sponsors in assisting and supporting learners in making informed, beneficial, and future-conscious decisions when it comes to literacy learning and the place it has in their lives.

## **Conceptual Metaphors**

The perspective of learner literacy investment proposed in this study is a new take on a familiar metaphor. While other researchers have focused on the economic associations of literacy, I propose this new perspective to show how learners function within the metaphor. Changing, replacing, or competing with the dominant metaphors that place learners in a more passive role has the potential to alter both thought and behavior.

Metaphor is a matter of thought, not simply language. In *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) point out that "our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature: the way we think and we experience life is very much a matter of metaphor" (p. 3). Metaphors are part of the way we understand and make meaning of life and ultimately shape behavior and action. For example, they also show the ways that abstract concepts, such as time and ideas, can be compared with money, something more tangible. People talk about *spending time* as if it were tangible currency or *selling an idea* as if it were a physical product. Andrew Goatly (1997) also comments on the way that metaphors affect thinking: "the metaphors we use structure our thinking, hiding some features of the phenomena we apply them to, and highlighting others" (p. 2). Choosing to use the conceptual metaphor that love is a journey rather than love is war, emphasizes certain elements while downplaying others. It, therefore, matters what metaphor we use to address adult literacy.

The metaphors that we use to discuss literacy affect the ways that we construct learners, sponsors, and their relationships. David Barton (2007) suggests that people use metaphors frequently to talk about literacy, and the choice of metaphor has clear consequences. Viewing literacy as a set of skills that one does or does not possess and illiteracy as some kind of sickness are metaphorical constructions. He writes,

Different metaphors have different implications for how we view illiteracy, what action might be taken to change it and how we characterize the people involved. For example, if illiteracy is a disease, then the people involved are sick, it should be eradicated, and experts need to be called in to do the job. If it is a psychological problem, then therapy or counselling are [*sic*] needed. Other metaphors call for training, empowerment, special education or social support. The participants might be construed as students, customers, clients, or recipients. The blame, if it is blameworthy, might be attributed to fate, the individual, the school, the family, or the social structure. (p. 11)

These metaphors can be found in both professional theories of literacy and in everyday understandings. By selecting a particular metaphor, specialists and non-specialists shape their own understandings of literacy and the understandings of others (p. 14). This view means that learners and sponsors have ways of conceptualizing literacy but may not share metaphors.

Sponsors, such as researchers and educators, have used metaphors to help explain the ways that literacy functions within social contexts. For example, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Paulo Freire exploits metaphors to describe both traditional literacy instruction and what he believes education should be. He selects an extended metaphor that communicates his critical judgment of the literacy instruction he observed and a metaphor to show the positive potential of literacy. In his view, educators often use a banking model, treating literacy and knowledge as some kind of currency that is deposited in empty accounts or vaults. This metaphor portrays learners as empty vessels, waiting to be filled. He objects to this model because "it transforms students into receiving objects. It attempts to control thinking and action, leads men and women to adjust to the world, and inhibits their creative power" (Freire, p. 77). Instead, Freire prefers to see education as "a practice of freedom," an emancipation of the oppressed. He adopts economic and liberation metaphors to communicate the ways that he imagines literacy education.

Similarly, Sylvia Scribner (1984) chooses three metaphors—adaptation, power, and state of grace—to describe the ways that people think about and value literacy,

although she is not endorsing a particular metaphor (p. 8). Adaptation relates to survival and a pragmatic view that many call functional literacy; power relates to how literacy enables a person to relate to the group; and state of grace is about salvation, the way literacy makes us better people. Choosing a new metaphor, however, is not a panacea for understanding what literacy means in people's lives. Each metaphor expands and constricts meaning, and Scribner's task is not to suggest that any of these metaphors is superior. She states,

> my purpose is not to marshal supporting evidence for one or the other metaphor but to show the boundary problems of all. My argument is that any of the metaphors, taken by itself, gives us only a partial grasp of the many and varied utilities of literacy and of the complex social and psychological factors sustaining aspirations for and achievement of individual literacy. (p. 8-9)

Each metaphor provides some insight into the ways that people view literacy. She concludes by stating that "ideal literacy is simultaneously adaptive, socially empowering, and self-enhancing" (p.18). Scribner combines the qualities of the metaphors for a fuller understanding of literacy.

I suggest a reworking the familiar metaphor of literacy as an investment, not with the expectation of finding the best metaphor, for, as Scribner suggests, any metaphor will provide only a "partial grasp" of the meaning of literacy. Since metaphor is already a part of the way we understand abstract concepts such as literacy, and since economic metaphors are already a part of the language, familiar to both sponsors and learners, it makes sense to use an economic metaphor to think about literacy. My re-oriented metaphor of learner literacy investment, however, is important for its emphasis on the agency that adult learners have in their actions as they risk their current resources in return for greater resources. It emphasizes the resources and decision-making power that adult learners have and use in their pursuit of literacy.

## Capital: Human, Cultural, and Social

Sponsors have often considered literacy as an investment in human capital, and they see themselves as the investors in learners. For example, the federal government

financially supports ABE programs that offer literacy instruction that leads to college enrollment or employment. The federal sponsors realize a return on their investment when the illiterate become literate, when dropouts become graduates, and when the unemployed become employed. In this metaphor, learners are dehumanized, represented as liabilities and assets. However, if the metaphor is re-oriented, learners can be seen as the investors of their own resources. To look at literacy investment through the eyes of learners disrupts the representations of passive and uncommitted participants that often accompany discussions of attrition/retention. Learners, not just sponsors, are looking for a return on their investment, and while their conversations might not include the term *capital*, their behaviors and words align well with the concept.

The term *capital* refers to assets and resources, but it also implies that these assets are available for the production of increased resources. Things that people possess can be put to work to help them acquire more things. Not all capital, however, is as tangible as gold or a piece of machinery. Some resources are intangible but have the power to be converted into economic capital. These resources are discussed in various ways with the terms human capital, social capital, and cultural capital.

Adam Smith (1776) is often credited with the origin of the concept of human capital. In his book, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, he describes capital as

the acquired and useful abilities of all the inhabitants or members of the society. The acquisition of such talents, by the maintenance of the acquirer during his education, study, or apprenticeship, always costs a real expense, which is a capital fixed and realized, as it were, in his person. Those talents, as they make a part of his fortune, so do they likewise that of the society to which he belongs. The improved dexterity of a workman may be considered in the same light as a machine or instrument of trade which facilitates and abridges labor, and which, though it costs a certain expense, repays that expense with a profit. (Book 2)

Through training and education, people become better at what they do and are able to do more. These talents stay with workers, and they are able to generate greater profits. Becker (1964) sees human capital as a means of production, so that investing in it

through education, training, or even medical treatment can increase economic output. Shultz (1977) develops human capital theory and challenges the classical idea that workers possess only the power of manual labor, arguing that "Laborers have become capitalists . . . from the acquisition of knowledge and skill that have economic value" (p. 314). According to Shultz, human capital includes "components as skill, knowledge, and similar attributes that affect particular human capabilities to do productive work" (p. 317), and the increase in labor earnings is a result of the increase in educational investment in workers (p. 320). This means that on-the-job-training, college/university programs, and adult literacy education all contribute to human capital. Participation in ABE and GED programs is part of human capital investment. Literacy itself is considered a general form of human capital that has value in multiple employment opportunities, not just a single job or career (Hollenbeck, 1993).

While many learners may lack abundant economic capital and may not have direct access to it, they do possess other resources and can use those to increase certain forms of capital that may be converted into economic capital. In "The Forms of Capital," Pierre Bourdieu (1983) defines capital as "accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its 'incorporate,' embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor" (p. 241). Capital is more than money or wealth, and it seems to have more to do with power and access made possible by both material and symbolic resources. Bourdieu points out that the focus on economic capital has incorrectly made us think that it is the only kind of capital and the only way to think about capital. He sets out "to grasp capital and profit in all of their forms and to establish the laws whereby the different types of capital . . . change into another" (p. 243). The three types of capital—economic, cultural, and social—can change form. Economic capital can be converted into money, and cultural and social capitals can be changed into economic capital.

Cultural capital comes in three states, embodied, objectified, and institutional, and it is the first and third types that pertain to this study. The embodied state refers to "long lasting dispositions of the mind and body" (p. 243). This is a kind of internalized capital, captured within the individual: "This embodied capital, external wealth converted into an integral part of the person, into a habitus, cannot be transmitted instantaneously (unlike

money, property rights, or even titles of nobility) by gift or bequest, purchase or exchange" (p. 245). It is housed or embodied in the person, but it has limits: "It cannot be accumulated beyond the appropriating capacities of an individual agent" (p. 245). To gain access to it one must be in contact with or employ the individual. This is a "symbolic capital," and its value increases or decreases depending on its availability (p. 245). For example, literate abilities, like language translation or map reading, are embodied cultural capital in that they are intangible and non-transferable but capable of being converted into economic capital through employment. The fewer people specializing in an area, the more in demand they become. The value of embodied capital has limits in that so much depends on context—what is needed and to what degree.

Cultural capital in the institutionalized state is a "form of objectification" (p. 243). Institutional cultural capital refers to academic qualifications, which aim to extend the limits of embodied capital which is trapped in the person: "With the academic qualification . . . social alchemy produces a form of cultural capital which has a relative autonomy vis-à-vis its bearer and even vis-à-vis the cultural capital he effectively possesses at a given moment in time" (p. 248). A diploma or degree or certificate, authorized by an institution such as a high school, university, or training program, can be accepted as proof of a person's embodied capital. A person does not have to be physically present in order to demonstrate possession of embodied cultural capital. The institutionalized state testifies that it exists. It makes the cultural capital official because it "institutes an essential difference between the officially recognized, guaranteed competence and simple cultural capital, which is constantly required to prove oneself" (p. 248). For example, a certificate of emergency medical training (EMT), conferred by a recognized authority, suggests that the owner has CPR skills, and those who accept the certificate do not require an immediate demonstration of those skills. Without documentation, one must perform in order to be evaluated. Official or institutional capital can be readily converted into economic capital. For example, a high school diploma or a GED certification can be used to gain employment. The value of these items, however,

depends very much on current context. One may be valued over another or neither might be of value if the job requirement is a college-level degree.<sup>52</sup>

Embodied and institutional cultural capitals are individual and independent possessions, but social capital depends on networks. Adult learners are able to draw on the collective knowledge, experiences, and skills of their friends, family, co-workers, neighbors, and sponsors when making literacy investment decisions. They do not make decisions using only their instincts and embodied knowledge; they use the social connections that they have to tap into resources they do not possess exclusively.

Bourdieu's conception of social capital helps to explain the interplay between structural positions and individual action. He defines it as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (p. 249). Social capital allows those who are part of social networks to access the resources of their connections. Coleman (1988) defines social capital as

> a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors—whether persons or corporate actors—within the structure. . . . [S]ocial capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible. . . . [S]ocial capital is not completely fungible but may be specific to certain activities. (p. S98)

Social capital theory emphasizes individual agency to make use of relationships, but it "inheres in the structure of relations between actors and among actors. It is not lodged either in the actors themselves or in the physical implements of production" (p. S98). Social capital differs from human capital because social capital is in the spaces between/among people, the networks/webs.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> This study does not fully support the more pessimistic descriptions in Bourdieu's work relating to agency. Much of what he describes stresses the unequal distribution of wealth and the ways that capital "contains a tendency to persist in its being" (p. 241). There is no "imaginary universe of perfect competition or perfect equality of opportunity, a world without inertia, without accumulation, without heredity or acquired properties . . . so that at each moment anyone can become anything" (p. 241). Still, I believe that learners do have agency and struggle against the odds to increase their capital.

According to Coleman, social capital comes in three forms (p. S107). The first form is obligations, expectations, and trustworthiness of structures. People can call in favors and debts, or use shared trust within community activities. The second form is information channels. Because information is costly (perhaps requiring payment of a consultation fee) and often elusive (inside a person's mind), some people might remain unaware of many things; however, people can obtain information through relationships rather than going directly to the source. For example, a person can buy a book and read it, or talk to someone who has read the book. Learners with limited literacies may have limited cultural capital, but they can access the capital of others through their social networks and through group literacy. The final form of social capital is social norms and effective sanctions. Norms both permit and restrict behavior. They can encourage support of community values (e.g. caring for the elderly) or discourage behaviors (public displays of affection). Adult learners can find motivation in the encouragement of family and communities that value literacy and education. They can use the positive and negative support when making decisions about their participation in particular programs.

As I will illustrate later, adult learners have capital to invest. They are not empty vaults, waiting to be filled by wealthy sponsors. They bring embodied capital in the literacies they have developed. They sometimes possess institutional capital with diplomas or other certifications. Learners also have social capital that connects them to resources greater than those in their immediate possession. They bring all of these resources to bear in literacy programs in the hopes that sponsors will help them invest wisely for a substantial return.

# **Sponsorship and Learner Literacy Investment**

The theory of sponsorship has provided an extremely important economic metaphor in helping academics and practitioners examine the relationship between those in charge of literacy and those who seek it, but it is not the only way to think about literacy development. In fact, because the theory focuses heavily on sponsors' roles in promoting and overseeing literacy, learner agency can be overshadowed. Learners are not seen to be acting and leading as much as reacting and following. This bias does not invalidate the insight that the framing metaphor of sponsorship gives, but researchers

should also consider literacy from the perspectives of learners to have a fuller picture of participation.

Deborah Brandt (2001), in *Literacy in American Lives*, uses the concept of sponsorship to frame her analysis of the literacy development of her participants.<sup>53</sup> Sponsors are "any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way" (p. 19). The role of the sponsor is active and powerful; the role of the learner is passive and limited. Brandt's work does not ignore the words or perspectives of the participants, but by using the sponsorship perspective, it suggests participants' actions and decisions are in service to the literacy sponsors who create the literacy opportunities and the demand for them. People learn to read and write because schools teach them to do so, employers demand that they do so, and society expects them to do so. Learner agency is overshadowed by sponsor control so that learners do not call sponsors into being to address a need, but learners find themselves directed by the needs of the sponsor.

Imagining adult literacy learners as investors<sup>54</sup> is a powerful change of perspective. Adult learners have resources, including time, energy, finances, and pre-existing literacies, which they are able to use to improve and expand their literate abilities. They seek ways to increase the human capital that is already embodied within. In most cases, they do not enroll in literacy programs without choice, and even when sponsors use "powerful incentives" such as qualifying for welfare benefits or reducing a jail term, adult learners have the power to say "not now" or "never" and find other ways to invest their resources.

In this re-oriented economic metaphor, sponsors are brokers who do not own literacy per se but have the power to advise and direct adult investors, to help them navigate the literacy system. Learners often speak about sponsors in ways that suggest that sponsors are working for them. Tutors, coordinators, and directors within programs take what learners give to them and attempt to improve the value of their current literate

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> See Chapter 1 for a fuller discussion of Brandt's theory of sponsorship.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> I am using some concepts from agency theory, as understood in business studies, where companies examine the conflicts between principals and agents and the costs of aligning the interests of both groups (Sahlman, 1990; Sapienza & Gupta, 1994).

assets in cooperation with the learners. They suggest and provide ways through programming and instruction that promise to return literate profits that can be re-invested in other markets. Adult learners listen to their counsel and invest in ventures they recommend (classes or tutoring sessions), ventures often owned and operated by brokers. Therefore, all is not equal in the literacy market; that is, brokers have additional roles and access, but this lack of equity does not negate the influential role of active decisionmaking of adult learners.

#### What Leads Learners to Invest

This study suggests that what motivates adult learners to invest in ABE and GED programs is a complex network of positive and negative forces, both internal and external, that is difficult to predict, and it becomes visible only through sustained conversation and exploration with adult learners. They are attracted to programs for different reasons, and they stay or leave for a variety of reasons, often linked to the current circumstances of their lives. For example, adults who wish to enter Regional Community College but fail the literacy entrance test might look to County Literacy to help them improve their literate skills so they can pass the test. However, to say that adults sign up solely because they fail a test is too narrow an explanation and does not represent the complexity of their histories or decision-making processes. Interviews with learners in this study reveal that choosing when to invest and where to invest is multilayered, even in the seemingly most straightforward of accounts.

Learners share a number of investment strategies and motivations, but these do not necessarily reflect the reasons that some sponsors value, leading to potential conflict that may contribute to erratic or half-hearted participation. For example, sponsors who promote the GED certification as the chief return on the literacy investment may satisfy one student's motivation, but if the sponsors fail to promote the personal connection that other students want to have with their instructors, they may never attract a segment of the potential population and risk losing those who are discouraged by a lack of speedy progress toward the payoff of the GED. Additionally, learners seek internal rewards, returns not evident in improved test scores or attendance records. These intangible

expectations often go ignored, and so sponsors are unable to capitalize on these internal motivations as reinforcement for positive participation behaviors.

The adult literacy learners in this study, described in the previous chapter, have varied personal profiles in the areas of gender, race, age, marital status, years in current program, children, educational activities, and occupation. Learners and students range in ages from 19 to 50, and the racial representation of majority to minorities is about equal as is the gender split. While none of the students in the GED program has a high school diploma, seven of the nine County Literacy learners have diplomas. About two-thirds of the interviewees are unmarried, while over half have a least one child. The participants have a variety of low-paying jobs and several are currently unemployed. County learners are a mixture of brand-new entrants and veterans, while most in the Regional GED program are there less than a year.<sup>55</sup>

Some fundamental differences in the two programs and sets of adults factor into learner participation. First, the adult basic learners at County Literacy are in one-on-one tutoring, while the GED instruction at Regional is in a classroom setting. Regional students receive less individualized attention, but the group dynamic allows for other influences on participation. Second, Regional has a very clear reward and exit built into its program. Students may create their own goals like those at County, but the College designed the program for a maximum of three semesters, and students are certified at any point in the program when they successfully pass all five GED tests. Third, no interviewees in the GED program have a high school diploma while seven of the nine County interviewees do. In fact, over 60% of the total learner populations in the County Literacy program have graduated from high school. Regional students often do not have significant struggles with basic reading and writing and sometimes have early exits from the program after completing the tests. Fourth, the GED program offers a wellestablished path into the college courses at Regional or another tertiary institution. All students interviewed were enrolled or planning to enroll in college courses. Finally, adults looking to complete their GED certification have multiple program options within the county, while County Literacy is the only individualized tutoring program of its kind

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> Learners do not have an official termination point. Students are expected to earn their GED certification in three semesters or fewer.

not linked to external performance measures (i.e. tests). These variations must be kept in mind when considering the forces that influence participation behavior.

#### **Initial Investment: Motivation**

While many studies and researchers have considered the forces that motivate adult learners to stay in programs or leave from them, not many have closely studied learners' reasons for entering programs. Those that have studied what gets learners through the door have focused mainly on forces as more or less discrete phenomena. Past research has not considered carefully the complex interplay of various forces; instead, it often posits one force or factor as primary. The findings I discuss later, however, suggest that sponsors cannot take for granted the factors and circumstances that learners use when they decide to invest in a program, and that learners sometimes do not value the ways that sponsors represent and advertise their programs.

The default position for sponsors and researchers is to assume that recent dramatic events within learners' lives are directly responsible for decisions to enter a program and to target that event to create motivation. These triggering events<sup>56</sup> are easily documented by sponsors and provide a clear, logical explanation for behavior. For example, in their work with adults participating in continuing and postsecondary education, Aslanian, Brickell, and Ullman (1980) cite triggering life events, those moments the adults experience that force them to confront their limitations: loss of a job, a potential job promotion, or a newly required computer skill. They state,

But something must happen in an adult's life to convert a latent learner into an active learner. Trigger events in an adult's life set the time to learn. Triggering events can be cataclysmic, such as a contested divorce, getting fired, or the death of a loved one. They can also be events such as the last child leaving for college, getting promoted to the next rung on a career ladder, or moving to a new town.<sup>57</sup>

Their research suggests a moment of conversion and transformation that inspires adults to invest in education. Wlodkowski (2008) summarizes some of their important findings:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> A trigger/triggering event has multiple meanings in business, psychology, etc, but here it refers to some moment that causes or motivates behavior such as pursuit of literacy.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> http://www.steincommunications.com/scoop/vol3\_iss1/adult.html

Given a choice among seven possible life transitions, 85 percent of the adults in her [Aslanian] study named a career transition such as changing or advancing their careers. For 71 percent, the specific triggers also related to career events such as seeing a job downsized or having to use a computer for the first time. In seeking education, adults in her study looked primarily for quality (program, faculty, course, degree) and convenience (location, schedule, length of time to complete program) as criteria for selection. In general, life transitions and triggers vary culturally. (p. 43)

Participants were given the options and asked to select what fit their lives (p. 43). The study already assumed the centrality of triggering life events.

Likewise, Denny (1992), in her qualitative research with focus groups of African American adult literacy learners, reports that the learners joined in order to be role models for their children or to assist their children with their schooling (p. 340). She also notes, "A few said they decided to return to school because a work situation required it, but for most it was a planned decision on their part to better themselves, with a specific event triggering their decision" (p. 340). Participation, she posits, is linked to specific triggering events, although she does point out that the adults were also looking for an opportunity to better themselves. The triggering event, therefore, is part of a larger story of planned decision-making, not a knee-jerk response to a difficult situation.

Triggering events occur within a context of current circumstances and a history of experiences. They are not isolated incidents. Fingeret and Drennon (1997) in *Literacy for Life: Adult Learners, New Practices* tell the stories of five adult learners and how their participation in literacy programs changed their lives. They discover that the adults in their study made decisions that related to many years of experiences and considerations. They describe "a set of accumulating conditions that describe the process of extensive change" whereby adult learners

- 1. experience enduring, acutely felt tensions in relation to literacy
- during a time—a turning point—when change feels possible or necessary,
- 3. which leads them to an educational problem-solving perspective

- and engagement in an effective instructional program in which affective bonds are formed and relationships outside of the program are supportive or neutralized
- 5. and where the adults are exposed to intensive ongoing interaction in the diverse social and cultural contexts that exist both inside and outside the program. (p. 105)

Adults have a lifetime of tensions relating to literacy, whether it is school failure, the inability to help their children with their homework, or the fear of being found out at work. Fingeret and Drennon (1997) suggest a positive outcome in this model, but the first three points show the complexity involved in a decision to enroll. A turning point refers more to a time, rather than an event, when change is thought to be possible, not simply demanded. To assume that a single event is a complete motivation makes learners appear reactionary rather than agentive.

Unfortunately, sponsors often posit a simplified system of singular motivation in the ways they approach adult literacy. This association between literacy and employment is readily documented in the titles of adult education legislature, like *The Workforce Investment Act*, and in the agencies that sponsor adult literacy programs, such as *Job Corps*. The Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) has oversight of adult literacy development, linking literacy development with work. In Michigan, adult literacy education is under the Department of Energy, Labor and Economic Growth. There is little room for learner investment based on a lifetime of tensions and motivations. These sponsors reinforce the notion that adults should and will join literacy programs primarily because of employment-related motivation.

While triggering events should not be discounted as important forces in decisionmaking, they are incomplete answers to a complex question: Why do adult learners join adult literacy programs? Allowing adult learners to speak for themselves provides richer responses than having them select from prescribed responses or assuming that a recent dramatic event is a powerful enough force to get adults to invest in literacy learning. To use a short-hand approach is to deny the agency of adults in making changes in their lives, ignoring useful information that could strengthen agentive decision-making. In *Intentional Changes: A Fresh Approach to Helping People Change*, Allen Tough (1982),

a scholar in adult education with an emphasis on self-directed learning and change, suggests that adults need to feel in charge of their intentional changes:

The central importance of the person in his or her own change process became very clear. People usually serve as the manager or navigator of their own intentional changes. They may receive advice, encouragement, and information from other people and books, but they fit this help into their own ongoing self-managed process. . . . The person is an active agent in managing and guiding the process of major change. (p. 55)

He suggests that people use the input they receive in their decision making. This can be extended to suggest that adults can use a triggering event as a factor, not the only factor, when deciding whether or not the time is right for an adult literacy program. The adults in this study discuss their complex network of considerations that is a part of their intentional behavior.

The main problem with linking adults' decisions to participate with a specific triggering event is that doing so oversimplifies their investment strategies and motivation. Triggering events become "the straw that broke the camel's back," that is, the final force that leads to the concrete action of enrolling. This cause-effect link is a fallacious argument, a post hoc ergo propter hoc, "after this, therefore because of this." For example, adult learners who join a literacy program after job loss might cite this as the reason, even though they might have been frustrated by limited literacy for years or have considered joining multiple times (Fingeret & Drennon, 1997). Using the most recent event before enrollment as the most important motivator leads researchers to concentrate on obvious and often dramatic occurrences: job loss, divorce, or failure to qualify for college. Many learners, however, speak of something internal as a motivator, not something out there in the world. Leonard, for example, employed as a stock picker for over 30 years, does not believe he is in danger of losing his job; the life changing events he mentions are marriage and parenthood. He speaks of taking an "inventory of myself" and the "shame" and "irritation" of not being able to read (Leonard 1.9). This internal inventory is connected with these positive life events, but it is not something easily identified using a survey. It happened within and was only evident to him and those with whom he chose to share this insider information.

However, by positing the influence of multiple forces, I do not mean to suggest a formulaic and linear progression, a building to some culminating moment, so that one thing leads to the next until the addition of all the factors produces the result. Forces exert varying levels of pressure and significance over time. For instance, Colyn entered County Literacy seven years ago on the recommendation of another program, and then he left to pursue a possible career change. He studied to be a truck driver but did not pass the exams and returned to the program just last year. While there are features in his story that resemble other stories, he has not followed a fixed script. Colyn is pursuing literacy within the context of other life decisions, and his goals change throughout his journey.

When learners speak at length, they provide more detailed information that can assist sponsors in fostering participation. Triggering events feature in the interviews but are never a complete response to the question, "What brought you here?" Adult learners in County Literacy expand, alter, and sometimes contradict their responses relating to questions about their decisions to join the program. The interview questions were openended, allowing the learners to provide answers in their own words rather than choosing a pre-worded response. Because the interview could last 30 minutes, they had time to reconsider, shape, and challenge their own answers. For example, Thaddeus, a new father at County Literacy, states that he joined because he wants to read to his daughter and because he wants to go back to school (Thaddeus 1.2). A short time later, he revises his answer to include reading to his nieces and nephews (Thaddeus 1.3). Still later he mentions wanting to increase his involvement in his church (Thaddeus 1.10). The students at Regional were no different, revising and building their answers throughout the interview. Todd, the 20-year old who joined with his younger brother, says, "Well, I wanted to get my GED and also my dad was kicking me out because he said, If you don't go through with this, I'm kicking you out" (Todd 1.3). He suggests that it is a positive motivation because it is something he wants, but he is also clear that he joins because of his father's threat. Later, he speaks of his frustration with not finding employment without a GED. Given time, learners share complex accounts of decision-making.

A quick response that names a triggering event, that has no further corroboration, may not be the same response provided later in an extended interview. When adults are asked their reasons for attending directly in an intake interview, they may provide an

answer in their own words, but that answer may be heavily influenced by their impression of the questioner. People often supply responses that they feel will secure them benefits based on their knowledge of the sponsor. For example, college applicants may never mention a desire to become a millionaire on a college entrance essay if they presume that this admission will adversely affect their admission. Instead, they may offer reasons that they feel match the preferences of search committees.

Likewise, adult learners, asked on the spot, may offer responses that they feel appease sponsors. Sarah, the mother of two who hopes to be a translator, ends her interview by saying, "I just hope I answered these questions *(laughs)* all right" (Sarah 1.12), as if she is aiming to please me, the interviewer. Others seem to refrain from negative criticism at the start of an interview, but express it more freely as the interview progresses. Leonard begins his interview, by saying that "reading is really nice, something nice to learn to do and it's interesting" (Leonard 1.1), but halfway into the interview, he says "reading gets complicated" before mentioning the possibility of leaving the program (Leonard 1.8). Brian<sup>58</sup> comments that, when he came to County Literacy as a learner, he provided responses he thought the coordinator wanted to hear:

So there's a little piece of me that's a con man and will be forever, I guess, but as I was doing that goals sheet, I thought that the woman on the other side of the table was going to want me to say that I wanted to read the Bible. I thought it would get me a tutor faster. So I said that that's what I wanted. In reality, maybe it should have been what I wanted, but most, but that wasn't what I was looking for. I was losing my job. (Brian 1.7)

Brian says he was so distracted by his job loss that he was willing to misrepresent his needs to the sponsor if that would get him into the program. These examples may represent selection and censoring based on what learners feel will ensure approval. This desire to please the granting authorities can be further compounded if enrollment is

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> Brian is a Caucasian male and the coordinator for Basic Literacy. His history with County Literacy goes back to 1996 when he was about to lose his job because the factory was closing. He learned about County Literacy at a career day and began as a learner in the program at the age of 36 when he confessed to his wife his struggles with reading. After starting with a tutor, Brian moved on to being a representative on the Learner Advisory Board. Brian later became a tutor, attended college, became part of the Board of Directors, and then joined the County Literacy staff as program coordinator. He has been on staff for 10 years and oversees adult basic literacy work, outreach and recruitment, and the jail tutoring program.

attached to financial or social benefits. This is not to suggest that their answers are dishonest, but that the interviewees were aware of their situation and sought to perform and respond in ways that they felt were good for them and their sponsors (including me).

A final difficulty in associating adult learner participation with triggering events is the emphasis on external motivating forces. Although positive and negative external forces are often at work, creating the need and motivation for literacy learning, internal motivation—relating to reflection, purpose, and epiphanies—is also at work. The adult learners interviewed comment on both internal and external motivating forces, and many of those who have made substantial progress toward their goals speak frequently of satisfaction, improved self-esteem, and increased confidence.

Sponsors, however, often bypass or downplay the importance of internal motivation. They instead concentrate on rewards that can be readily documented such as certification, college enrollment, or job placement. They emphasize economic rewards heavily to adult learners and very rarely promote an intrinsic value of literacy and learning.<sup>59</sup> They also trust that the threat of job loss, missing out on opportunities for promotion, or loss of social welfare benefits will also stimulate participation and persistence. For instance, Regional's GED program heavily advertises the external goals of jobs and college as reasons for attending. One flyer begins "Do you want to go to College? We can help!" The website includes, "It's a fact. Almost every job that pays well requires some college education. But how do you get that education when so many things stand in your way?" The materials appeal to important but limited factors in learner investment.

County Literacy is an exception. It is less focused on the external motivations and rewards because the program is not directly connected with job placement and college enrollment. The program supports the goals of the learners through designer tutoring, and so their promotional materials mention internal rewards. On its website, County Literacy includes a message of empowerment as a motivation: "For 39 years we have been empowering adults through improved literacy." This message, however, would seem to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Harvey Graff (1979) has already debunked this literacy myth, that literacy guarantees any kind of financial success.

connect primarily with donors and members of the public since none of the learners I interviewed had used the website.

Daniel Pink (2009), in his book *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us*, suggests that many businesses and organizations are using outdated external rewards and punishments systems to foster productivity rather than focusing on intrinsic motivation. His criticism has wider applications:

The problem is that most businesses haven't caught up to this new understanding of what motivates us. Too many organizations—not just companies, but governments and nonprofits as well—still operate from assumptions about human potential and individual performance that are outdated, unexamined, and rooted more in folklore than in science. They continue to pursue practices such as short-term incentive plans and pay-for-performance schemes in the face of mounting evidence that such measures usually don't work and often do harm. . . . Something has gone wrong. (p. 9)

Pink's argument, derived from scientific studies of motivation such as the works of Harry Harlow (1950; 1953) and Edward Deci (1971; 1972), suggests that getting adults to succeed depends more on internal motivation rather than external motivation.

Pink goes on to review other work from the behavioral sciences that shows that extrinsic motivation is less effective than intrinsic motivation, and it can limit growth. He writes, "In environments where extrinsic rewards are most salient, many people work only to the point that triggers the reward—and no further" (p. 58). In adult literacy programs, this could have the effect of encouraging adult learners to dream small. For example, if adult learners enter a program, motivated to learn in order to qualify for certain jobs, they may be likely to leave early if they find jobs. If they are not there for the purpose of learning with a sense of intrinsic value, then leaving to obtain the external reward seems viable and possibly preferable.

The ways that sponsors have framed the problem of participation have thus been problematic. Focusing on external factors and reducing learner decision-making to reactions to triggering events has led some sponsors to construct and promote programs that have limited connection to the populations they attempt to reach and serve. Given the

multiple and multilayered factors that inform adult decision-making in investment, it is not enough to emphasize economic associations with literacy as a way to ensure participation.

### **Initial Investment: Entry**

In this study, learners report being affected by a number of internal and external forces that help them to make the bold decision to invest in their literacy development with a particular sponsor. Positive motivations are more easily recognized—a job promotion, participation in a hobby, access to books, a desire to read recipes, qualifying for government aid, and college enrollment—but negative motivating forces—like potential job loss and shame—are also significant factors in the decision to enter a program. This network of positive and negative forces, both internal and external, suggests a sophisticated, multiply motivated investor whose decision to register is anything but simple and spontaneous. Investors think about family, college, employment, failure, dreams, and much more. While sponsors do play a role in learners' decisions to invest, surprisingly, learners do not make their decisions based on an intimate knowledge of the goals, mission, or full description of the program.

Learners often think about college and furthering their education before enrolling. They invest in institutionalized cultural capital: the educational qualifications that signify one's literate abilities (Bourdieu, 1983, p. 248). It is not enough to be able to read and write; rather, one must have documentation of those abilities even before one is asked to demonstrate them. The students in the GED program regularly report being unable to get a job or even be considered for an interview without a diploma or high school equivalency. Choosing the GED program affiliated with Regional Community College is therefore strategic in that it not only resolves the lack of a high school qualification, but it also promises a college career and better employment options. Most participants were already on the waiting list for classes for the following semester and had already spoken to counselors. This is not to suggest that students in the GED program see Regional as the only college option. Shania and Rachel selected nearby colleges as their transfer schools, suggesting that the college goal was not completely restricted to the location of the GED program.

By contrast, the learners in County Literacy often have diplomas and do not need to obtain documentation of literacy but rather literacy itself. Several of the County Literacy learners—Catlyn, Vaughn, Jennifer, and Daron—were already enrolled at Regional in pre-college and certificate courses and were using the tutoring services to improve their literacy and help them manage the college course requirements. The learners made intentional dual investments that provided multiple benefits. They had not put all their resources into a single program but had diversified their literacy investments.

Learners also report thinking about current and future employment before enrolling, including seeking new employment, searching for better employment, and protecting current employment. In most cases, their concern for employment is directly linked with economic earnings. Bourdieu (1983) points out that embodied cultural capital, such as literacy, and institutionalized cultural capital, such as a college degree, can be converted into economic capital (p. 243). The learners see this potential for economic enhancement. For instance, Daron had early warning that he would be losing his job when the company announced its move overseas: "I knew I was getting laid off, so the only thing I haven't did, I've did nothing for myself in my whole life but work 12 hours a day seven days a week for 29 years. . . . So I decided that I would like to read and write. I have to prepare myself for a new job" (Daron 1.1). Sarah wants her GED certification and college entry because "I'm tired of working fast food and doing hotel work" (Sarah 1.4). Shania was working with the same company for 14 years, but when a new owner took over, she felt that she had lost job security: "They were like you're not um, like you're not sellable without a GED or high school diploma. And I, and I've always wanted to go back and get my GED and then maybe get my degree, but I just, there was never that push" (Shania 1.2). These learners comment on the human capital development they hope to achieve, and they believe they will become more "sellable" in the job market.

Learners are not just focused on current threats such as the loss of a job (triggering events), but they are also making decisions to pursue adult literacy because of their vision of the future. Jennifer is unemployed, but she is thinking about owning a janitorial business. Colyn buys and brings books like *Government Grants* and *Advertise from Home* to his tutoring sessions because he sees them as tools for achieving his

entrepreneurial goals. Catlyn has a part-time job, but she is imagining the family-run bakery that she will open one day. Vaughn is in one-on-one tutoring and in college preparatory classes to prepare himself for the garage he will own. Employment is a motivator for the present and the future in the lives of these investors, and they are imagining short and long term pay-offs.

Internal rewards are also powerful considerations for learners involved in my study. While mentioning better employment and increased earnings, they also talk about individual satisfaction and positive feelings associated with decisions to join programs. They seem to want me to understand that this is not all about the money but that they have important internal motivations. Shania mentions the importance of education and her career, but she also sees her decision as important for personal reasons:

I hope to gain, to get my GED so I can further my education, to help my career. But it's also a personal gain. It's just something that you know, I've got, I, I achieve that I should have achieved back then. Now I'm, it's just one loop I'm, one more loop I'm closing on a personal level. And then at the same point in time, a career level, because although I have all the experience in my field, without a degree, that's not the total package. (Shania 1.4)

Shania feels like something has been missing in her life, something left unfinished. She is comfortable with her level of experience, but she wants a personal gain or reward. Julian also describes this unfinished feeling and the need to complete something, but in a more negative way. He says,

You know, you go through life you know, doing things, and some of us don't finish things or you know, you want to do stuff but you can't. I'm, I want to put myself in a position uh, with everybody else who, if you, if you can get this done, you want to get this done, you *should* get this done to satisfy yourself because I had to get that monkey off my back. (Julian 1.6)

The monkey on his back, usually a reference to addiction, was a burden that he had to address and be rid of in order to have satisfaction and the freedom to do more. Similarly, Bruce wants a "better life," and when I asked him what that means, he replied, "A better

life, to me, is that I can have the education to provide for any means uh, won't have to worry. And just be happy. You know, without it, so far, I've been kind of down, but I know I still can achieve anything if I put my mind to it" (Bruce 1.8). Shania, Julian, and Bruce are all seeking some form of relief and inner peace, and they believe that completing the GED program will allow them to find personal satisfaction. They are investing in their emotional stability and sense of well-being.

The learners at County in my study also consider internal motivations when investing. Participants speak of epiphanies, realizing the great value of literacy. Leonard states, "I realize reading, learning to read is a big, big thing to do in society because you need it according to life and how to get around" (Leonard 1.1). When I asked Daron how he became involved in County Literacy, he replied, "I actually wanted to do something for myself and that's the, the most, biggest thing that I want to tackle in life, and do" (Daron 1.3). Personal revelations also occur before re-entry into the program after a period of absence. Colyn remembers spotting one of the coordinators in the library and deciding then to return: "So I said immediately right there, like let me talk to him and let me get his number, stuff like that" (Colyn 2.10). These learners realize the value and importance of doing something about their own literacy development, and they make the investment.

While thinking about themselves before investing, learners also consider the needs of their families. They think about the ways that literacy development will help them provide financially for their children and other family members, as well as the way their enrollment and completion of a program will shape the educational goals of their children. This is a different kind of investment in the future, providing economic capital that their children can use to succeed. The learners in this study express strong commitments to their families. A number of students, particularly mothers, mention leaving school before graduating in order to care for their children but also to look after sick relatives. Going into a literacy program is a continuation of that care. At one time, leaving was a demonstration of love because the needs of the family came before education. Later, returning to literacy learning, in the hopes of better financial provision, is the expression of love. For example, Rachel wants to "make my life better for me and my son and my family and help me get further along in school so I can get a better job

and be able to take care of my son better" (Rachel 1.1-2). Sarah reports that she needs to get a good job and the GED program will help her to get it: "Like before I wanted to do it, but it was huh, whatever. Now, I just, I like *have* to do it. I really want to. And I'm, not just for me. For my family as well" (Sarah 1.2).

The fathers in the study are not focused on economic provision for their families, possibly because they felt they were financially stable. Leonard has a comfortable job that he feels confident he will have until he retires. Thaddeus does not mention finances other than to mention he receives disability aid. Both men, however, say that they were strongly influenced to join by the birth of their daughters. Leonard says that the birth of his first child leads him to acknowledge that he could not read. When I asked, "And why did you come here for the first time?" Thaddeus responded, "I just had a daughter and I wanted to be able to read to my daughter" (Thaddeus 1.2). Both men suggest a desire to be good literacy models for their children. They plan to create habitus of literacy for their children that will become social capital.

Most of the mothers in the study express a similar desire to provide positive literacy models for their children and thus create social capital for their children. They acknowledge that they have not taken traditional paths, such as graduating from high school, but they want their children to be proud of how they responded to life's difficulties and to take a lesson from their lives. Renee clearly states that a reason for her joining "is to show my kids that even though I dropped out of school, I came back to make myself better and to do better" (Renee 1.3). Maria wants " just to feel better about myself, because I have two children, and I dropped out of school at a young age and you know, just to say, Hey, Mom went back and did it, you know, finished school, and to hopefully get a decent paying job" (Maria 1.3). Shania, who has three older teenagers, already has experienced affirmation from her children: "they've always been like, Mom, you should go back to school, because you'll be fine. You'll do fine. Um, they're very proud of me and so, and I do, I'm glad that I came back to school because my youngest daughter, um, was having some problems in school and . . .you know, obviously, now if I finish my GED, she can't be like, well you didn't do it" (Shania 1.13). These women want their children to value education so that they will invest in it readily.

Not all motivation, however, is positive. While sponsors should not look to cultivate negative types of motivation, they should be aware of the place they have in the experiences of adult literacy investors. Learners often recall dark and difficult times and feelings in their lives that factor into their decisions to make an initial investment. For instance, failure is a powerful motivating force. All of the Regional GED students failed to graduate from high school, and they see the GED qualification as a way for making up for that failure. All of the County Literacy interviewees mention failure at various points in their lives and connected this with a desire to enter the program. For some, it was failure to qualify for entry into college-level programs and courses. The majority of adult learners interviewed in County Literacy possessed high school diplomas. However, possessing a diploma did not guard against feelings of failure. For example, when asked about graduating, Thaddeus responded, "I graduated. I got a diploma. I tell my mom I don't think I deserve it, but she said I did" (Thaddeus 1.5). He sees the institutionalized cultural capital in his diploma as unearned. Furthermore, when some learners took entrance examinations, they were told that they would have to join non-credit remedial or college preparatory courses unless they improved their reading and writing skills. Lack of one kind of capital denies them access to another kind. They are required to work longer for the same returns.

Shame is another significant motivator. Learners do not want to have their capital resources revealed. Many participants in this study associate shame with leaving or avoiding a literacy program. However, several indicate that they feel ashamed that they cannot read or write well, and this shame factors into their decision-making. Leonard says, "It's irritating. To know you can't read is shameful" (Leonard 1.9). Daron remembers feeling embarrassed when he had to complete paperwork for his dental appointment:

You know for 29 years I go to the dentist. Well I can't fill no paperwork out. I can't even read it. So how embarrassing, and gives you a panic attack . . . when you have to tell the secretary you know, I don't read and write. Makes you feel dumb and stupid, and you're just panicking. You're panicking all the way there. You're thinking . . . about it all the

way there. The night before, you can't sleep, then you go to a new doctor. Same thing. (Daron 1.15)

Daron believes that developing his reading and writing literacies would enable him to leave the shame behind and to approach literate situations with greater confidence. Sometimes participants do not mention shame directly as a motivating factor but allude to it when discussing their secret participation. Many of the participants do not mention their participation in County Literacy or Regional's GED program to anyone, and some confine their sharing to immediate family within their household. For example, Shania plans to tell everyone about her future college work, but her current GED work is a carefully guarded secret:

> Well it's, it's tough juggling work and trying to make it to school and then um, there's not a lot of people that know that I don't have a GED or high school, so it's kind of, like my family knows and my close friends know, so it's kind of under wraps. So it's not like I can be like oh, I'm going here (*laughs*) or I'm going here. So it's kind of difficult because I have to, like a lot of people at work do not know, either. So it's just like, oh, I have to leave. I have to leave because I have to be somewhere. (Shania 1.10)

Shania spends a lot of time and energy ensuring that the office does not know, other than her bosses. She looks forward to telling people about her classes with Phoenix University, but, until then, she will keep her educational background a secret. The learners wish to avoid discussions of their capital when they judge it as low, but they seem more confident when they are able to improve the state of their resources.

Learners must consider and navigate a network of influential forces before making investment decisions. However, the ways they gather their information rely on the social capital they have in the community, not on traditional consultation of literate materials, such as websites or brochures. Learners primarily depend on a system of referral and recommendation built on trust in their social networks and sponsoring authorities. They put their social capital to work and receive their information secondhand. They consult sisters, cousins, friends, significant others, nephews, and some unnamed informants. Some members of their network such as case workers/managers simply pass on the information to investors. Others recommend the program based on

personal experience. Julian says, "I've got a girlfriend, her name's M. She goes to Regional . . . and uh she was uh telling me about the program there that she had learned that I could go . . . I assume she enjoyed or was excited about the program if she was recommending it" (Julian 1.1-2). Her experience helps him to determine whether the program is a good investment.

The exceptions to this pattern are Rachel<sup>60</sup> and Shania. While others did recall competing programs or alternate sponsors, Shania clearly articulates decision-making using research and comparison. She says,

I was searching for GED classes and I wanted something um, because there's multiple ones out there but I wanted one that you actually had to go, come to class and that they would actually give you the GED prep. . . I didn't want the one where they just give you the book and send you on your way. I wanted the actual one that we were in the classroom. If you have questions, or you don't understand something, they go over it. (Shania 1.1)

Shania indicates that she is aware of multiple programs and at least two structures, but she looks for a program that uses a classroom model. When I ask if there are other options like this program she says, "Not that I could find, anyways" (Shania 1.2). While her response does not reveal the full depth of her search, it does show planning and evaluation based on research.

Members of learners' social networks are not simply passive repositories of information. Sometimes family members and friends actively engage learners by pressuring them to invest, reflecting the third type of social capital relating to norms and restrictions (Coleman, 1988). The network is able to encourage and support literacy investment. For instance, Daron's sister did the investigating for him: "Actually my sister found a place for me and everything and got me . . . actually, with a number that I could call. And she kept calling me to make sure. Have you called yet? Have you called yet?" (Daron 1.3-4). Maria remembers that a friend told her about the program two years ago, and that Renee encouraged her to participate: "She got a couple of us girls to do the program with her and she really encouraged everyone like, Come on, let's go get our

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>60</sup> Rachel's story is told fully later in this section.

GEDs, and we all joined with her, so . . . she's the cheerleader (*laughs*)" (Maria 1.2). Bruce's auntie not only encouraged him to move in with her, but she led him to the program: "She brought me down here and introduced me to the people. That's why, um, I say my auntie because she really (*laughs*) knows where everything's at" (Bruce 1.1). These learners would have had difficulty reading and comprehending certain print resources or they might not possess the research practices that others have, so they used the capital they have to determine the quality of the investment.

Learners who want to enter college courses also consider sponsor referrals when making their investment decisions. Regional Community College is the chief sponsor responsible for referring learners to County Literacy and students to the GED program. Those learners applying for college courses who do not pass the literacy entrance test are referred to County Literacy to improve their reading and writing skills. These learners put a great amount of trust in the advice of the sponsor. Vaughn is the most extreme example because he claims to have enrolled with no knowledge of the program:

*Randy*: Okay. Did you know anything about the program before you signed up?

Vaughn: I knew nothing about it.

*Randy*: So, from no one else?

Vaughn: No one else told me about it. I just knew that if I didn't do this or

get that done, I wouldn't be where I am right now. (Vaughn 1.2) Vaughn sees joining County Literacy as absolutely necessary and responds with unquestioning compliance. Catlyn responds with matter-of-fact compliance after meeting with a Regional counselor:" I found out about County Literacy by the Learning Support Center . . . where I met with um, a counselor there and she told um, me my reading and writing level wasn't up to their standards yet so she gave me um, a card for a write, um, uh, literacy" (Catlyn 1.2). She then goes on to say "I have not ever heard about this program before" (Catlyn 1.2). Jennifer says that she knew about the relationship between the two programs, but her response suggests that the recommendation was all she needed to try the program: "I was just recommend by Regional Community College . . . because they work with County Literacy. And they told me if I went there, that they would help me, so I went to try it to see how it was" (Jennifer 1.6). Learners place a considerable amount of trust in the recommendations of sponsors.

Sometimes the referral is a cooperative effort. Learners are able to pool resources and get the advice from friend or family members and from sponsors. Marcy,<sup>61</sup> a counselor at Regional comments on this phenomenon:

*Marcy*: So and I get a lot of students who bring in friends that they want to get in the program so the word of mouth referral is, is pretty strong.

Randy: Okay.

*Marcy*: And so I see a lot of students that way when they come in with their cousin or their brother or their mother, whatever.

*Randy*: Okay, so you, you help to direct them toward what might be the most appropriate course, or

*Marcy*: Right. (Marcy 1.3-4)

Learners can come in on their own, but they find support from friends and family, who not only tell them about the program, but physically accompany them to the college. Once there, the sponsor is able to help direct them further.

Learners also use other sponsoring agencies such as schools and social aid organizations to determine the viability of the programs. Trisha worked with Jewish Family Services and was recommended to County Literacy. Colyn, when remembering his first experience with County Literacy, says, "I went to the Stone School, they, we did some tests. After that, they recommended to this County Literacy" (Colyn 1.5). Thaddeus recalls, "A social worker told me about it and I think I had walked in. . . Walked in on my own just to try to see about. She told me about it" (Thaddeus 1.3). He

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> Marcy is a Caucasian female and a part-time counselor here at Regional Community College. She is a retired public school counselor and math teacher who worked with grades K through 12. Marcy has been with Regional for five years and works on academic counseling with credit earning students, but the majority of her assignment is to facilitate the GED program. She does not teach in the program, but works with enrolling and monitoring about 100 students per semester as they move through the program. A significant part of her job is to transition students into credit earning classes when they complete their GED.

emphasizes that he walked in on his own, seemingly unaware of the full scope of the program.<sup>62</sup>

This reliance on referrals and recommendations combined with thoughtful, independent reasoning may seem like an odd mixture of forces. On the one hand, learners are thinking about present and future economic needs, mapping out educational journeys, reflecting on feelings of satisfaction, and providing inspirational role models for their children. On the other hand, they are signing up without much personal investigation of programs, relying on the authority of referrals and recommendations. The two mindsets appear to be at odds.

A closer look at the profile of adult learners, however, helps to explain how, as investors, they can take such strong control over their investments while also placing so much faith in the recommendations and referrals of friends and sponsors. First of all, adult literacy learners cannot navigate the adult educational system in the same ways that college and university students do. There is no *US News and World Report* on the Best Adult Literacy Programs. There is no well described and accessible print or digital network of information about programs. While community colleges do network with each other, adult literacy programs often do not. Literacy programs typically advertise with funding agencies such as federal and state welfare agencies. Moreover, adult literacy programs frequently close or go into hibernation due to low numbers or insufficient funding, so what exists one semester may not be in operation just a few months later. I had to eliminate two potential sites because they were no longer in operation, even though they were shown to be active on the state's adult education website. Indeed, even the most experienced researcher has difficulty locating and navigating the adult literacy offerings within a community.

Even if there were such a network of information, adult literacy learners may lack the confidence and literacy skills to navigate it. They did not succeed in traditional schooling and often feel inadequate when it comes to directing their own educational journey. Instead, they rely on the social capital that they use to function in the world: networking and deferral to authority. Networking is a social capital that they exploit, and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>62</sup> Some factors that are not discussed in this section because they are mentioned infrequently include the influence of church, convenience of location, and parental influence.

while sponsoring authorities may have let them down in the past, learners have no choice but to trust them. They trust the experiences of others and the authority of sponsors in combination with the other motivating factors, all of which contribute to their investment decisions. Adult literacy investors, therefore, are both quite capable and quite vulnerable all at once, making it all the more important for sponsors to be in a supportive and trustworthy relationship with them.

#### Getting in the Door: Rachel's Story

Examining each potential consideration separately fails to account for the ways that learners use the forces in their lives to inform decisions to invest in adult literacy programs. Analyzing each factor separately runs the risk of emphasizing one force over another simply by its placement in the discussion sequence or by the amount of commentary. To better understand learners' investment processes, it is useful to examine a single learner's story, which demonstrates the complexity of decision-making.

Rachel is a 31-year old mother of a seven-year old son who was planning to get married in the summer when we met for the first time. She left school over twelve years ago in order to assist her family in caring for her invalid grandmother. One day, while at a state employment office, her case manager recommended the GED program at Regional to her. The office happened to be next door to one of Regional's off-campus GED sites so she went in and signed up. Two months later, she had her GED and later enrolled in a college program, studying to be a medical assistant.

Rachel's experience appears to be a fairly straightforward story of one unemployed single mother, looking for employment and being directed to the GED program in order to ensure employment. The decision almost sounds accidental; however, the story is more complicated. Rachel used her social and cultural capital to invest in a GED program that promised to increase her current capital and provide access to greater economic capital in the future. Although she had come to an employment office seeking work, she was not required to enroll in any GED program to avail herself of the employment services. She comments that she was at the employment office:

*Rachel*: [Regional] is right next door. Um, my case manager told me about it and it sounded like something that would be good for me.

# *Randy*: Okay. Um, was it something you were required to do, or just a suggestion?

The location of the office and the proximity to the GED program created an opportunity for her but did not force her to make the choice. She chose to use this information provided by her network, which includes her case manager.

An important issue to consider is that Rachel had been thinking about investing in a GED program for years. She says, "I was out of school and I really wanted to come back and be able to get my GED so I could go to other classes and stuff like that . . . to make things better for my family" (Rachel 1.1). She has had the welfare of her family on her mind for a while, helping to care for her grandmother. She had even left school, where things were going well: "School was pretty good for me, but the reason why I left is my grandmother was really sick and my mom needed help taking care of her so I left school just to help with my family and that, and it, I mean, school was okay for me. It's just I had a lot of family problems" (Rachel 1.5). Her commitment to family was greater than her commitment to education in that moment.

Rachel also has a family of her own: her son and fiancée. She aims to improve her human capital to have access to more economic capital for the sake of her family. Her son appears often in her discussion of reasons for attending the program: "My most important reason: I want to make my life better for me and my son and my family . . . and help me get further along in school so I can get a better job and be able to take care of my son better" (Rachel 1.1-2). She thinks about her old and new family, and she devises a plan for improving their situations. Rachel feels that going further along in school would lead to a better job and a better job and a better life looks like, Rachel responded, "Mm, um, going into like, working in the um, like medical field and being able to um, get my own house and things that I need and, and for my son (*laughs*) and me and pay for my wedding and everything else that I need to do" (Rachel 1.2). She imagines a life where she is able to provide economically for her family and the things she values, like a house and her wedding. In the interview, Rachel never loses focus on her family. When I ask later about what she hopes to gain from the GED

*Rachel*: Mm, it wasn't, it was just, just a suggestion. I didn't, I wasn't required to do it. (Rachel 1.1)

course, she answers, "a better um, like better, go through better schooling and make a better life for me and my family" (Rachel 1.5). She places care for her family in a place of supreme importance and sees the GED as a way to access employment that will earn the finances to provide care.

Although Rachel's impulse to care and provide for her family dominates the interview, I noted that her son is seven years old and asked her why she had not tried earlier for her GED. I asked her why the time is right now, and she said,

I've gotten like, I had, my child was sick for a while and it's just now he's getting better medically and I was having some medical issues, too so now that everything is under control and my medical issues are gone, and my son's are, now I am able to focus on schooling and stuff for myself. (Rachel 1.5)

Rachel has been hampered by the seizures that both she and her son were having. She had to provide close attention for him and so could not afford to give attention and time to her learning. Later on in the interview, she elaborates on her struggles with illness that the medication has relieved:

One of my thing is I have epilepsy and sometimes if I'm sick or I've been having a lot of seizures, I have a lot of trouble doing things, remembering things, so that's one of the things that now with my medicine and that I've been able to overcome and do what I need to do to get through my classes and that. (Rachel 1.7)

The right time for investing exists because Rachel is able to spend more time away from her son with less anxiety about his health. She is also able to manage her own health and get the most out of her classes.

Still, this is not the full story of how Rachel came to invest in the GED program. She decided to join the program because it is something she wanted to do. She made an informed decision. Although she did not know much about the program initially, Rachel attended an orientation and talked with a counselor:

> With the orientation and they helped me explain things, and if I could do better in my life and too, and finishing and be able to do, go through other schooling if I wanted to and told me how that they could help get signed,

me signed up for other classes after I was done with my GED. (Rachel 1.2)

The orientation presented her with the information and offered her the option of continuing studies at Regional. After considering all of the information she "decided it was definitely something I wanted to do" (Rachel 1.2).<sup>63</sup>

Rachel's decision to invest is the result of the ways she uses multiple motivations. She is highly motivated by a desire to care for her family, to provide for them financially. Rachel was looking for an opportunity when a member of her social network presented a recommendation for a program. She investigated the program with a counselor and determined that the investment was sound. Medication assisted her in improving the quality of her health and her son's health, removing obstacles that she has faced in the past. She has successfully begun the process of improving her capital resources.

# **Continuing Literacy Investment: Should I Stay?**

Making the decision to invest is tremendously important, but walking through the door for the first day of tutoring or attending a first class is not enough to guarantee a successful learning experience and a good return on literacy investment. While forces combine in multiple ways to encourage initial participation, adults already enrolled weigh other factors when determining participation. The findings of this study very much align with those of previous research, such as the assertion that learners participate consistently when they receive individualized attention and support (Quigley, 1997; 1998), and learners also participate consistently when they see evidence of the progress in literacy learning (Brod, 1990; Tracy-Mumford et al.,1994; Hamann, 1994). What is different is my claim that learners behave in these ways not out of passive compliance with sponsor efforts, but out of active evaluation of the state and perceived profitable returns on their investments. They expect an increase in human and cultural capital. Because investors expect a return, they must continually monitor the progress of their investment. It is not good enough to assume that a class or tutoring relationship that provides good yields for a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup> It is interesting that Rachel chooses to attend a different college after passing the GED because Regional does not offer the program and career path she wishes to pursue. She is still making informed decisions.

month will always be positive. Learners regularly assess the value of literacy in their lives; as Leonard says, they regularly take an inventory.

Learners respond favorably when they receive individualized attention and support. They discuss this attention primarily in relation to a bond with their tutors and instructors, but the students in the Regional GED program also found encouragement in peer support. The County program uses a one-on-one method so that only two personalities are involved in the relationship. After the intake coordinator matches a tutor with a learner based on personal information that they both provide, they are linked for the next six months. Tutoring sessions are one-on-one without anyone else present for developing relationships (unlike students in the GED course). Learners speak approvingly of tutors that they feel are interested in their goals and needs. Thaddeus says that his tutor was "more interested in what I wanted to do [than previous tutors]" (Thaddeus 1.2) because she chooses materials that relate to his love of music. Without this attention to his needs, it would be easy for Thaddeus to skip a session: "Like I said, it, it, she's making it more interesting for me. If she didn't, I probably wouldn't even be here. I'd probably said, I'm not coming today" (Thaddeus 1.7). He expects his tutor to work for him, to respond to his investment needs. Jennifer echoes Thaddeus's discussion of supportive tutors when she says, "They help you with your goals also. So if you've got goals you can go there. It'd be a good place, if, if that tutor is, and got, ya'll got, it's got to be that type of relationship, because if you don't have a relationship, it's not going to work" (Jennifer 1.9). Leonard recalls one tutor fondly: "I mean, he was more my age wise. Very comfortable when you read with him . . . he the one really got me moving" (Leonard 1.5-6). The bonds are so strong that learners will often remain with tutors for a number of years, even while they revise and re-interpret the goals they set when they entered the program.

In fact, relationships with tutors can become a kind of social capital for learners. The learners above speak fondly of their tutors and come to rely on them for more than isolated lessons in reading and writing. Because the program is tailored to meet the articulated goals of learners, learners ask sponsors for help in navigating unfamiliar or unusual literate situations. For instance, Catlyn and Jennifer have used their tutors to promote success in their pre-college courses. They asked for longer hours and specific

focus on the course materials. My student, Trisha, asked me for help in buying a new car and locating free legal services. Leonard wanted to write a letter to the President and had his tutor help him produce the letter and figure out how to mail it to him. The literacies and knowledge that tutors possess become part of the resources that learners can access as social capital.

Adult students in the GED courses also speak of the role of attention in their decisions to stay. Even though they are in a group setting, numbers as high as 30 students, many speak of individualized attention from instructors. Bruce says, "This program helps me. It helped me out a lot because the teacher, S, she's very nice. She works with you if you have any problems" (Bruce 2.5). His instructor is able to work with individual concerns. Devin acknowledges the attention he has received from support staff: "The instructors are good, you know, you can also sit down and talk with counselors that'll help you, you know, because here at Regional it's like you know, they're here to help" (Devin 1.12). Students receive career and college guidance as well as help with the GED testing.

My interviews with participants in the GED program suggest that the support other students can give to their peers is also important. Julian and Maria comment on how they have a role in the success of their classmates. Julian remarks, "I like to give other classmates motivation you know, and uh you know, I, I like being there" (Julian 1.14). He feels that he can succeed on his own, but the support he can offer is a reason to stay. Maria is part of a group of four neighbors and friends who are in the course together, and she feels that having friends there makes it easier "because if I get stuck at something at home, we all live near each other, so we can just call each other up and say, Hey, come show me how to do this math, or whatever and it really helps out. Because one, some of us have, are stronger in other subjects, you know" (Maria 1.3). Maria draws on her social capital, since as a group, they have a better chance of success. Sarah does not know any of her classmates when she arrives but still feels supported: "so now I mean, this class, I mean the people are, the people in the class are amazing. They're really good people.... You know now I'm here to do it and it seems like everybody's, you know, right there with you" (Sarah 1.7). Thus, peer support can be felt both within and outside of the classroom.

Staying in the program is often linked to children. Adult students want to provide financially for their children, to set an example for them, and to show the value of setting goals and achieving them. Bethany had studied to be a medical assistant but could not get hired without her GED, so she stays because "I'll be able to work and that's really important because I have a child to take care of" (Bethany 1.5). Shania has three kids that she wants to encourage and inspire and stays to show them it can be done. Rachel says, "My most important reason, I want to make my life better for me and my son and my family" (Rachel 1.1). All of the mothers interviewed mention the influence their children had in their decision-making.<sup>64</sup>

Like children, family members are a consistent presence in the lives of learners, even though learners often recall a specific episode that they found encouraging. In these cases, the motivation to continue comes from an external source that applies pressure on the learners rather than an internal drive. Todd's father threatened to throw him out of the house if he did not attend, but he also attended with his younger brother who offered competition and support. Bruce's aunt promised to give him a graduation party and also found him a tutor to support his studies. Daron has the support of his wife who tutors him every week. Sarah's spouse encouraged her to rejoin after dropping out: "my husband and me talked about it and he kind of helped me to get back in it and just do it" (Sarah 1.1). Many of the interviewees saw family members as steady influences in their decisions to continue participation.

Learners continue to participate when they have external proof of some sort of success, confirming that they have made the right investment decision. They want to see an investment report. Catlyn and Jennifer were able to enter college level courses after being placed in preparatory sections. They attribute their success, not so much to the prep courses, but to the work with their tutors. Catlyn says, "I don't know how long I would say I would probably, I'll probably keep going . . . through my college years" (Catlyn 1.3). She is willing to stay as long as she sees the evidence of her progress. Jennifer has documented evidence of her improvement based on her COMPASS scores: "after having a tutor, coming to County Literacy, I went back, took that COMPASS. The first time I scored a 40. Then, this time, 66 . . . and with, and been working with my tutor ever since

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> There were no fathers in the ten Regional Interviews and just two in the County Literacy interviews.

and from me working with her from then 'til now, I've boosted my score at least 20 points" (Jennifer 1.5). Thaddeus had his progress confirmed by his mother: "Yeah, I kind of tell her, matter of fact, I read to my mom last week and she said I improved a whole lot, so . . . she could tell. She could see the difference" (Thaddeus 1.3-4). Vaughn sees the progress in his reading and writing confirmed with assessments. He says, "I learned how to punctuate, read better, understand better, and I had to go test again to get into my first reading class. They said I had to test to a 70 or higher to get in. I tested an 84 and I jumped to another class" (Vaughn 1.2). These learners continue to participate when they are reaping the rewards and are aware of them.

Adult learners also mention staying through sheer determination and selfmotivation. They have decided that the time is right, they have set goals for themselves, and they are going to achieve those goals. This sense of self-motivation is not discussed thoroughly in adult literacy literature, possibly because programs do not feel they have any real control and influence over it, but the learners themselves feel it is significant. This drive is possibly fed by other motivating factors as well, so that determination increases with the presence of each additional factor.<sup>65</sup> Leonard, the oldest learner interviewee, says he was "enthused of wanting to really read, so I push myself" (Leonard 1.6). His desire is a driving force in his participation. Jennifer speaks of self-motivation: "But you've just got to be willing. Self-motivated. And that's one thing that I am. I am motivated. I want, I've got goals and I'm going to go for them" (Jennifer 1.9). When asked about his motivation to join County, Colyn replied, "the main thing is that I wanted it" (Colyn 2.11). Learners who are new, had returned after an absence, or have been with the same tutor for years all indicated some inner drive or force of will that was feeding into their participation.

## **Reconsidering Literacy Investment: Should I Go?**

If learners are agents who actively invest their resources, trusting sponsors with their time, current levels of literacy, and efforts, expecting a return on their investment, then they could be considered the employers of sponsors and sponsor services. This is a powerful transformation of the traditional perspective of investment. Often, learners have

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>65</sup> This is speculation since my study has no way to prove this empirically.

been referred to as clients, and sponsors can drop clients that do not pay or who disappoint their expectations. However, within the metaphor of learner literacy investment, learners are investors who hire or employ sponsors for their services.

As employers, learners are able to hire sponsors when they choose to attend their programs, or fire them, when they choose to leave. While learners cannot remove coordinators, directors, or instructors from their positions, learners are able to withdraw their resources, making it impossible for the sponsors to work for them. Jeffrey Grabill (2001) indicates something similar when he writes, "We [sponsors] set out on our mission to make [adult literacy learners] literate, and in a variety of ways, they tell us to go away" (p. x). Leaving a program, therefore, is an agentive act based on an assessment of the potential returns on the literacy investment, usually in light of other investments such as family, jobs, and one's own well-being.

Bingman, Ebert, & Bell, (2000), in their NSCALL occasional paper *Outcomes of Participation in Adult Basic Education: The Importance of Learners' Perspectives*, explain what happens when programs focus on sponsors rather than learners:

> Adult educators tend to focus efforts on what is measured and reported, particularly if funding is tied to it. Are we measuring and focusing on what is important? It is not clear that a consensus on desired outcomes has been reached or that everyone, particularly learners, [has] had a voice in determining what is measured. Adult basic education runs the risk of not meeting the needs of those adults whose goals for participation in adult education do not include (or go beyond) employment or a secondary credential. Adults whose goals are not being addressed by adult education programs will leave. (p. 14-15)

My research confirms that if the focus is assessment from the sponsor's perspective, and adult learners' needs are ignored, they leave.

While attention encourages learners to stay, behaviors interpreted as inattention contribute to stopping out and dropping out. Thaddeus tried two tutors before finding one that he feels is interested in him: "Like I was telling my tutor, the first two were boring. They were, they were just like wasn't interested in what I wanted to do. . . . They wanted to do what they wanted to do" (Thaddeus 1.2). Jennifer dropped her first tutor and

remembers, "The other one was like you, if you wanted to learn, she would help you learn but if you didn't, then you didn't. So that's why I quit, because it wasn't going nowhere with the last tutor. This tutor is going somewhere" (Jennifer 1.3). She interprets the tutor's approach as unproductive. Bethany left another GED program and cites the lack of proper attention to the students, saying, "No offense, but the teachers weren't really, I mean, they'd give you work to do and like if you went up to ask them for help, they would help you, but they never really did anything in class with *all* of the students" (Bethany 1.6). She does not have time to waste on a poor investment. Leonard recalls previous programs before this one where he felt he was not receiving attention specific to his needs. In one, he was the oldest and felt the program catered to youth. In another, the tutoring relied on a GED text, and he says, "I felt uncomfortable because you're going to achieve, but you can't read, you don't know nothing still. You're just attending something that you don't really know how to relate to" (Leonard 1.4-5). Leonard never got the attention he felt he needed until County where he saw his first progress.

A lack of progress or success is also a common factor that learners share when discussing terminated tutor relationships or potential termination. Jennifer remembers a previous tutoring relationship: "I had a tutor. I went six months. It was no progress. I, I can honestly say today that I didn't think I was really putting my, put, being, being involved like I was supposed to . . . so I wasn't successful" (Jennifer 1.3). She admits that she was at least partially responsible for her lack of success, but it may not matter where the fault lies. Adult learners might interpret a lack of progress as reason for dropping out rather than a reason to re-evaluate and revise the ways they participate. While they have agency, they do not have control over program hiring and placement practices.

On a more positive front, leaving is not always associated with a negative influence (Cullen, 1994). Learners stop when they change their goals. Colyn decided to pursue a career in truck driving, and he says, "If I hadn't took the truck driving thing, I would have probably still been [with] a tutor" (Colyn 2.10). While he did not achieve his license, he deliberately pursued his new goal, one that had potential for financial and job security. Daron entered a literacy program when he was 20 years old and then was offered a job that eventually paid close to \$100,000 per year. He quit the program and

chose to increase his economic capital before coming to County Literacy many years later. Learners also leave when they accomplish their current goals. Vaughn is pursuing a college level program and uses County Literacy to support his studies: "As long as like it's helping me and I see it's helping me, I'll stay. But if I realize that after I'm done with this and that, we might not need it. But I'll still keep in contact. She's a great person" (Vaughn 1.4). Vaughn will terminate the tutoring if he no longer needs it after his course. Learners are also willing to pause from their tutoring if they feel they need a break. Leonard, who had been a learner with County for almost ten years, wonders if he might need to withdraw for a while:

> It might be a one year break, not because, because I push myself so much, 'til I say, Well, I think I need me a break to take time with myself to see when I'm at or do I, where's my determination, really go for that? . . . So the break would be in between to see where I'm at. How do I feel? Where's my, how do, how comfortable do I feel with this? . . . Because sometimes I push myself so much 'til I say, Wow, I think I better break. (Leonard 1.8)

As a 50-year old man, working a full-time shift for most of his adult life, Leonard believes a break might be a good time to re-evaluate his commitment.<sup>66</sup> These decisions to leave and contemplations of pausing or terminating participation are not knee-jerk responses to bad experiences but are thoughtful actions and considerations based on what learners feel is best for their lives.

In the interviews, learners also shared concerns that they did not link directly to leaving but that might become factors in their investment process. These are situations and circumstances that put strain on their participation. For example, learners expressed concern over prioritizing investment and ensuring that they had sufficient resources. They prioritized literacy learning but had other places, like home and work, where they also needed to invest sufficient time, energy, and attention. They could not afford to invest all of their resources with one broker and ignore others, but juggling competing demands is not easy. Bethany observes that it is hard to attend to all of the responsibilities of home

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup> Leonard was the only County Literacy interviewee who turned down a second interview because he was too tired and busy to fit in another interview.

and school: "With me I think it's keeping up with the homework because you do get a lot of homework . . . and when you have children or have other things that you've got to do, it's hard to maintain them all and with your how you say, um, schedule" (Bethany 1.4-5). Shania finds it difficult to maintain full time employment and attend to the course: "Well it's, it's tough juggling work and trying to make it to school" (Shania 1.10). Maria is not struggling with the material itself but with giving attention to all that is important to her: "But the course itself seems very easy and learn, you know, when I'm at school I have no trouble at all, but it's just the time at home with the family and having time for everybody, you know. That's where my challenge is, I feel like just with the kids and (laughs) trying to be there for everybody" (Maria 1.9). Nonetheless, Todd is the only one to mention leaving as a result of scheduling conflicts. He had dropped out of the Regional GED program twice before, but later he passed all five tests in less than a semester. He attributes his leaving to his inability to work with an early schedule: "Because I've done it before. I went twice before; one time at 8:30 a.m. and another time at 12, and I couldn't wake up for either one of them, so I uh, I basically quit" (Todd 1.1). As these examples illustrate, adults do not have just one investment to manage and may struggle with apportioning their resources on a daily basis.

Sponsors are sometimes unaware of the intensity and stress of this daily investment assessment until learners are in crisis. Allison<sup>67</sup> presents a powerful composite of learners' struggles:

In terms of going back and forth and in out of the program, a lot of that's personal. A lot of what happens and in the struggles of our students are really huge, and I don't think we realize how huge until we get a voice mail um, we get, I get, we were, we were dis, we were disgruntled by the number of people that sign up for tests and then don't come for tests. What we started to realize is, if you have a low level job and your employer says, I want you to work, I want you to stay on on Monday, they, they're not going to care whether you have a GED test scheduled. So

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>67</sup> Allison is a Caucasian female and the Professional Services Instructor for the Adult Adjustments Program at Regional Community College. She is from the area and taught high school and middle school for 26 years. While teaching high school, she joined Regional as a part-time director of a workplace literacy program. She left the college in 1992 and then returned in 1997, hired to create the Adult Adjustments Program at Regional.

there is roadblock. Um, if you have, if your car breaks down. I had somebody called me, My car broke down. I got a new car. My kid got sick. I couldn't come because of that. Can I still come? So there have, they have lots of barriers. (Allison 1.12)

The barriers she describes are the realities and responsibilities that adult learners deal with regularly. Adult learners have their resources spread out among a number of areas, and Allison acknowledges that sponsors might misunderstand the motivation behind absenteeism. Learners may be responding to sponsors disgruntled responses when they ask "Can I still come?" If sponsors require their program to be the only or most important investment for their learners, learners may reject the program.

Some of the forces that relate to withdrawal are the result of a group or class dynamic. The classmates in the GED program are another concern that could lead to dropping out. Although these GED sections are designed to be group instruction, some interviewees are not very comfortable in the group for various reasons. Devin connects motivation with the classroom climate:

Well some of the challenges, I'm going to have to say, probably are like mm, I would have to say like getting motivated, you know, to come and hurry and finish it up, you know, because sometimes I might slack around ...you know, and then when I come into class and a lot of people you know, are loud and fooling around, it makes me not want to be there ... you know, at some times, but other than that, I mean, I really haven't had too many challenges. (Devin 1.11)

Devin ends with a more positive response, but he comments on how the behavior of the group can affect the behavior of the individual. If his peers are not taking the class seriously, he explains, "It makes me not want to be there."

Age is an issue that can also lead to anxiety. Many of the students in GED classes are in their late teens, and some are still in high school. The students I interviewed, however, tended to be older and were sometimes intimidated by the age differences. Sarah recognized how long it has been since she was back in school: "I'm struggling a little bit, but I'm getting it. . . . And I guess it's because I haven't been in school in so long. . . . It's been 13 or 15 years so it's been a really long time for me. So I'm, I'm, I'm struggling a little bit" (Sarah 1.11). Maria linked struggle with age when she said, "It's harder to do it now at 30 than it would have been to finish high school" (Maria1 6). And Shania simply noted the age discrepancies without much commentary: "There's a lot of young people (*laughs*)" (Shania 1.3). She later comments that she is choosing a college other than Regional because "it's more, more adults, work driven" (Shania 1.5). Just as a positive and helpful cohort encourages learners to stay, anxieties over their classmates have the potential to affect their participation.

## Conclusion

For many years, sponsors have represented themselves as investors in adult literacy. For example, The Workforce Investment Act of 1998, the primary legislation that governs the work of adult literacy, states the following purpose:

The purpose of this subtitle is to provide workforce investment activities, through statewide and local workforce investment systems, that increase the employment, retention, and earnings of participants, and increase occupational skill attainment by participants, and, as a result, improve the quality of the workforce, reduce welfare dependency, and enhance the productivity and competitiveness of the Nation. (Sec. 106)

The title and the purpose statement make it clear that the sponsor, the federal government, is the agent investing in adult learners. The sponsor identifies and pursues the desired outcomes: improved employment figures, reduced welfare, and a productive, competitive citizenry. This representation denies adult learners important agency, comparing adult learners to children learning in compulsory schooling, who participate because they have to, without full understanding of the value of literacy in their future lives.

I am arguing, in contrast, that adult literacy learners should be represented as determined and resilient investors, making informed decisions about their resources. They decide which sponsor, whether it is a federally funded or private program, can be trusted with their resources of time, energy, finances, and current literacy levels, and they invest based on the information they have regarding the markets. Learners join programs often after complex considerations of multiple factors, including current and future

employment, family responsibilities, economic benefits, self-esteem, recommendations, referrals, and many other forces. They stay when they see development and returns with their investment such as improved assessments, new literacy skills, and access to other literacy opportunities. They leave when sponsors disappoint them or when the investment becomes a strain on their total resources, including family, job, finances, and personal well-being.

I do not want to suggest that all investment decisions are good ones. Adult learners often make choices and take risks that are not supported by the market. For example, Leonard first invested in a GED program before realizing that he needed something that focused on his literacy skills in a one-on-one setting rather than a classroom experience focused on a standardized GED tests. Learners also decide to withdraw their investments in ways that are imprudent. Sarah mentions the negative influence of her first husband as a reason for leaving her GED program the first time and regrets leaving. She says, "I really wanted to get my GED because I dropped out of school. But then when you have somebody that tells you, you know, You can't do it, you just kind of go, you're like oh, whatever" (Sarah 1.2). Nevertheless, making bad decisions and investments does not refute that they make decisions. Sponsors, therefore, can play a greater role in informing and supporting adults to help them make wise literacy investments. Dialogic engagement with learners about their literacy would be an important part of helping learners make prudent investments.

#### Chapter 6

#### **Literacy Meta-Discourse**

## Introduction

In the previous chapter, I challenged the economic metaphor of sponsorship, offering the alternate term of *learner literacy investment*, which positions learners as thoughtful investors of their own resources in literacy activities with the expectation of literate pay-offs. In this chapter, I argue that the literate resources that learners both possess and develop should include literate practices, such as reading and writing, as well as a discourse for thinking and talking critically about literacy. I show how literacy meta-discourse is valuable capital for learners and examine how sponsors both enable and restrict learners in their pursuit of literacy meta-discourse. In our interviews, learners take up literacy meta-discourse in various ways and demonstrate various levels of proficiency. Often, sponsors do not recognize this ability in learners and do not directly seek to cultivate this capital, and learners may not have an explicit, articulated goal relating to meta-knowledge. Nevertheless, learners still possess and develop critical perspectives that could enable them to engage sponsors in complex discussions of their literacy understandings, needs, and goals.

My study suggests that adult learners and sponsors have understandings of the term *literacy* that resemble each other's but are not identical. Sponsors and adult literacy learners do not approach the term *literacy* in the same ways, nor do they have a single shared definition of literacy. Sponsors, who are already literate, are able to use and discuss literacy with great confidence. They dialogue with other sponsors around definitions of *literacy*, and they regularly revise and challenge these understandings based on reflection and personal experience. Learners are also able to engage in discussions of *literacy*; however, they display a range of confidence levels when discussing the meaning of the term and do not have the same dialogic experiences as sponsors. Some learners

avoid the term *literacy*, others cautiously consider its meaning, some revise selective meanings, and still others confidently analyze and discuss its meaning.

Having a set of understandings of literacy and dialogic experiences different from tutors, staff members, and executive directors has significant consequences for learners and their literacy investment. Sponsors converse and associate with other sponsors, negotiating definitions of literacy or challenging them from a position of authority as literate people, familiar with the language of literacy. Learners, however, often look at literacy through their own difficult schooling experiences and moments of crisis within their lives when their literate abilities were exposed and harshly judged. Many learners consider themselves impoverished in terms of literate resources. Literacy has often been a source of tension and struggle in learners' lives, and so it is understandable that they are cautious about committing to programs, no matter how eager they are to improve their resources. Still, in spite of these inequities, learners from County Literacy and Regional Community College's GED program do take up literacy meta-discourse with various levels of proficiency.

This study shows that not only is literacy a form of cultural capital that learners and sponsors assume will provide access to economic capital, but meta-discourse about literacy is also capital. When these two forms of capital combine, learners may be able to strengthen their agency and make more independent and informed decisions relating to their literacy investment.

## **Literacy Meta-Discourse**

Conversations with adult learners reveal that they are self-consciously investing in literacy. Not only are they learning to read and write in ways that they interpret as profitable, but they are also figuring out how to talk about their literacy practices. They are developing a critical discourse about their literacy learning that has the potential of shaping the ways they invest in programs and dialogue with sponsors.

A critical discourse is not limited to vocabulary and syntax. James Gee (1989) defines Discourses<sup>68</sup> as "ways of being in the world; they are forms of life which

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>68</sup> Gee makes a distinction between Discourse ("Big D" discourse) as defined above and discourse ("little d") which is language in use. After this usage, I have chosen not to capitalize the term unless it is in a

integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes" (p. 526). Discourse relates to our meaning-making of the world, the lenses through which we experience life. The ways that learners and sponsors think and talk about literacy and the contexts in which they reflect and dialogue affect their understandings of literacy. Gee states that "Discourses are not mastered by overt instruction . . . but by enculturation ('apprenticeship') into social practices" (p. 527). He argues that people can only participate in a discourse if they are around the practice and other people who possess the discourse.

Gee (1989) also distinguishes between early and later discourses. Primary Discourse is, "the one we first use to make sense of the world and interact with others" that is acquired "not by overt instruction, but by being a member of a primary socializing group (family, clan, peer group)" (p. 527). This identity is created in the home and establishes the way learners see and talk about the world in general and literacy specifically. A secondary discourse is one acquired from "non-home-based social institutions" such as "local stores and churches, schools, community groups, state and national businesses, agencies and organizations"; Gee adds that each "commands and demands one or more Discourses, and we acquire these fluently to the extent that we are given access to these institutions and are allowed apprentices within them" (p. 527). As people interact in groups and institutions outside of the home, they adopt ways of being that may conflict with a primary discourse, but it also has potential to help people better understand primary discourse.

Adult literacy learners, like everyone else, have discourses that have been a part of their lives since birth as well as newly developed discourses. They develop their identities in the home first and then within social groups and practices outside of the home. Home provides the first set of literacy experiences and shapes the attitudes that people have toward literacy (Gee, 1989). Literacy, therefore, may be considered a primary discourse. Outside of the home, school-based experiences are perhaps the most powerful forces in a learners' lives in terms of the way they will approach and value literacy.

specific quotation. All uses in this chapter suggest his first concept, the "ways of being in the world" rather than specific sequence of utterances. I find the mid-sentence capitalization distracting.

A number of scholars have criticized Gee's theorizing of discourse. In particular, several scholars have challenged his argument that people cannot obtain proficiency in a primary discourse through instruction (Gee, 1989, p. 527). For example, Delpit (1995) has associated his view with determinism: "if you're not already in, don't expect to get in" (p. 546). She feels that people are positioned as helpless, both in the discourses they are born into and in the discourses they can acquire in life. Gee himself critiqued his theory, suggesting that it had troubling implications for women and minorities (Gee, 1989, p. 532). He wanted to believe that people could gain access to discourses that they did not acquire in the home.

I also challenge the notion that discourses operate to reinforce some predetermined caste system. I acknowledge that those born into homes where certain school-based literacies are emphasized and encouraged will have an easier time in settings, like compulsory schools, where those literacies are valued. However, I also believe that literacies can be developed with study and intentionality. What I find most useful from Gee's theorizing of discourse is his recognition that one can develop a discourse for looking at other discourses:

Classroom instruction. . . can lead to meta-knowledge, to seeing how the Discourses you have already got relate to those you are attempting to acquire, and how the ones you are trying to acquire relate to self and society. Meta-knowledge is liberation and power, because it leads to the ability to manipulate, to analyze, and to resist while advancing. (Gee, 1989, p. 532).

Gee argues that people can gain a better understanding of their discourses, like literacy, through deliberate analysis of them. Adult learners, therefore, can gain power and liberation by developing their meta-knowledge of the literacies they seek.

I call this critical awareness of literacy and the ability to analyze it *literacy metadiscourse*.<sup>69</sup> This term does not suggest creating a single, permanent definition of literacy, but it emphasizes the ability to engage, defend, and alter one's concept and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>69</sup> Gee uses the term "powerful literacy" which he defines as "control of a secondary use of language used in a secondary discourse that can serve as a meta-discourse to critique the primary discourse or other secondary discourses, including dominant discourses" (Gee, 1989, p. 542). I have chosen a new term because Gee's reliance on words like "control" and "mastery" when discussing powerful literacy relate to troubling metaphors and can contribute to a binary of literate/illiterate.

understanding of literacy, through dialogue and reflection. Literacy meta-discourse is a dominant discourse because it provides "the (potential) acquisition of social 'goods' (money, prestige, status, etc.)" (Gee, 1989, p. 528). Using meta-discourse, learners are able to analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of programs before they invest or after they have enrolled in them. They are able to make informed choices that better serve their goals, which are often linked with money, prestige, and status.

Sponsors are proficient in literacy meta-discourse. Most often, they have acquired literacy from a young age, and it is part of their primary discourse. In addition, they have learned ways to talk about literacy, to apply the lenses of other discourses (for example, teacher discourse) to better understand literacy. Sponsors are aware of variations of understandings among sponsors and have a sense of the ways learners perceive literacy. They acquire and develop their meta-knowledge of literacy through schooling and time spent with other sponsors. In addition, they observe learners and use their conversations and interactions with them to enhance their own meta-knowledge.

Sponsors, however, do not often seek to engage learners in dialogic exchanges that would develop learners' understandings of literacy. Adult literacy legislation focuses on developing literacy, not literacy meta-discourse. Some researchers have downplayed the significance of meta-knowledge. For example, Venezky, Sabatini, Brooks, and Carino (1996) suggest that, when developing policy and practice, the central focus must always be on literacy itself, not on learners' confidence or attitudes about literacy (p. 3). They feel that, while programs should not ignore goals that relate to the ways learners feel about literacy and themselves, these must be lesser considerations. In spite of sponsors' lack of and resistance to intentional attention to learners' understandings about literacy, learners find ways to use and enhance their literacy meta-discourse, often relying on limited resources to develop pragmatic but sometimes complex understandings of literacy.

## **Talking about Literacy**

In order to get participants to think about literacy and what it means to them, I asked each participant—learners and sponsors—to respond to the term *literacy*. I did not ask any participant the direct question "What is your definition of literacy?" because the

loaded term *definition* might suggest that there is a single correct meaning, a prescriptive response, something that can be ratified in a reliable dictionary. The question usually appeared near the end of the interview, after interviewees had thought about their experiences and had become more accustomed to speaking with me. I reasoned that this would avoid a question that felt like an ambush and might result in silence, confusion, and resistance. In interviews where participant responses mentioned or suggested *literacy* before I asked about it directly, their responses became the transition to a discussion on *literacy*'s meaning.

The question about literacy was an invitation to engage with a term that is rife through literacy research and documents relating to sponsored adult literacy initiatives. While I suspected that sponsors would recognize and use the term, I wanted to examine the extent that adult learners were familiar with the term that has such a powerful influence on the programs in which they participate. The question appeared in multiple ways. For instance, I asked, "What comes to mind when I say the word *literacy*?" If interviewees seemed nervous, I assured them that there were no right or wrong answers and that I had heard a variety of meanings. This usually set them at ease or gave them courage to offer an answer, even if the response was "I don't know."

Before discussing the ways that learners and sponsors are able to talk about literacy, I must make an observation concerning my role in the interviews. The sponsors recognized me as a colleague. Although they may have had greater years of teaching experience and certainly more experience working with adult literacy learners, I introduced myself as a PhD candidate, completing dissertation research in adult literacy. In many cases, I identified that I had taught high school and college courses in English as several of them had. Both program directors interviewed me before agreeing to allow me access to the program, I presented at County's full staff meeting, and I submitted an official request in writing to Regional's Research Committee before receiving approval. In other words, I identified myself as a literacy sponsor.

I believe that the learners also identified me as a sponsor. While I foregrounded my student identity in my introductions, the consent form and our locations for interviews—classrooms, libraries, and study rooms—associated me with literate authority. As a student at University, I also presented as someone successful in sponsored

literacy. I have fluency in the language of literacy, and so learners would not see me as a learner like them. Finally, my position as a tutor placed me with sponsors.

The consequence is that in interviews, sponsors and learners see themselves speaking with a sponsor. Sponsors use vocabulary that only sponsors in the work of literacy would recognize (community literacy, for example), and learners deferred to me a number of times when they were unsure of the accuracy or quality of their responses. There were, however, a couple of occasions where this set of identifications blurred, and these will be addressed as they surface.<sup>70</sup>

## The Literacy Meta-Discourse of Sponsors

The literacy meta-discourse of sponsors is an amalgamation of the theories and practices surrounding adult literacy from the earliest interventions of the federal government. While the various views on literacy have some distinctions, sponsor understandings of literacy fall roughly into two categories, as outlined by Lytle (1991): "literacy as skills and tasks, and literacy as practices and critical reflection/action" (p. 380). According to Lytle, the first group of understandings approaches literacy as "a neutral or objective set of skills, independent of any social context or ideology" so that literacy is "singular and stratified, a set of universal, cognitive, and technical skills" (p. 380). The works of Jack Goody (1977), Walter Ong (1986), and almost every federal government literacy sponsor fall into this category. The second understanding of literacy is built on ideas by those who argue that "practices differ from group to group within a society as well as from society to society" (Lytle, 1991, p. 381). Shirley Brice Heath (1983), Brian Street (1993), and some private sponsors challenge the autonomous definition and help to shift the focus from literacy to literacies.

One would be hard pressed to find academic researchers and theorists in the current field of literacy studies who would suggest that the older understanding of literacy is more accurate and helpful than the new conceptualization of literacy. According to Catherine Prendergast (2003),

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>70</sup> Daron, for example, takes on the role of a sponsor, but he speaks to me as someone who does not have his meta-knowledge. He offers to help me understand what he already knows.

By now a near consensus among literary scholars has emerged that literacy is a context-specific phenomenon characterized by a range of cultural practices around the use of print, rather than a universal and quantifiable skill . . . [There is a] move toward a conception of culturally situated, shifting and multiple "literacies" and away from a single, normative literacy, even while state and federal legislatures in adopting standardized testing pursue the opposite course. (p. 9)

The consensus, however, does not mean that the matter has been resolved. As Prendergast observes, assessment relies heavily on the first category of understanding. Measurement is easier to design and administer if literacy is presented as a universal and quantifiable skill. Those who want to be able to offer and measure literacy in quantitative ways represent a very powerful group of sponsors of literacy, and their definitions have informed and continue to shape public perception and understandings of literacy.

Sponsors benefit from the history of adult literacy work and research, even if they do not deliberately study adult literacy history or conduct their own research. Program literature, meetings, and training ensure that sponsors are immersed in dialogue about literacy. For example, a new volunteer tutor with no previous teaching experience will be immersed in a community of sponsors and must adopt program perspectives and practices or finds ways to negotiate multiple understandings of literacy. A single sponsor is not restricted to the first or second category of understandings but might proclaim both views in a single statement. More importantly, sponsor discourse includes an awareness of multiple understandings, even when they choose one meaning over another. As a result, sponsors learn to approach the term *literacy* with confidence and facility.

Sponsors in this study do not have any difficulty thinking or talking about what literacy means. They are intimately networked as tutors, instructors, counselors, coordinators, and directors, exposed to discussions of literacy, perhaps daily. Sponsors are comfortable using the term *literacy* with me and engaging in a discussion about the concept for an extended period. Several use the term before I introduce it in the interview, such as two instructors from Regional. Katrina,<sup>71</sup> while discussing her

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>71</sup> Katrina is a Caucasian female who is a retired high school teacher. She is an instructor with Regional Community College as well as the state university in the School of Education. Her original love was marine

counseling work with learners, says, "Because, you know, they're not going to do, do well in that class if they're still struggling with literacy" (Katrina 1.7). She is talking about students entering college level courses unprepared for the literacy expectations of the College. Shirley<sup>72</sup> mentions using "literacy books" to help an older learner improve his reading level (Shirley 1.9). She has materials that target specific reading and writing activities. At County, the director and one coordinator initiate the discussion of literacy. Abigail<sup>73</sup> discusses the meaning and work of community literacy (Abigail 1.6-7), and Brian is the first to mention *illiteracy* in our interview, saying "illiteracy is not a death sentence" (Brian 1.3). Sponsors never have to feel ambushed by the term because it is already a part of their vocabulary and regular conversation.

Sponsors' familiarity with the term and concept is also apparent in the way they discuss the evolution of literacy. While learners try to provide the right answer, sponsors are willing to provide contingent responses. They recognize that the meaning changes over time, and they appear willing to adapt to those changes. The Regional Program Coordinator, when thinking about literacy, feels that "right now, I think, I think it's fluid. . . I think that it changes from decade to, from minute to minute" (Allison 1.15). She does not name what causes the changes, but she is aware that the meaning is in flux at the moment. Abigail, the director of County, supports this view of constant change. She says that the perspective on what counts as literacy is always changing: "You know, I mean, I

biology, but she earned a teacher's certificate and has been teaching for 43 years. She says she loves teaching, but she felt the need to move from the high school classroom after 32 years because of frustration with administration. Katrina enjoys teaching adult learners and "trying to get their minds stimulated to think about things and be passionate about things and care about things and want to make a difference" (Katrina 1.8).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>72</sup> Shirley is a Caucasian female who has been teaching English in community college for a number of years and teaching GED courses for almost 10 years. Additionally, she has been a social worker for over 20 years. At 22 years of age, Shirley began teaching but comments that the nature of community college students has not changed much since her start. She feels that it is important to care about her students and to get to know their stories in order to help them succeed. Shirley describes them as "amazingly courageous" (Shirley 1.17).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>73</sup> Abigail is the Chief Executive at County Literacy, responsible for overseeing all operations for the organization. Her chief roles are to raise money for the program and to be the public face to the community. She has a number of speaking engagements and provides an expert perspective at functions or conferences. Prior to this position, Abigail spent the last 20 years as a non-profit executive. Her background is in counseling/psychology and social work, and she worked for a while as a therapist with young adults who were dealing with mental health challenges. One of her undergraduate degrees is in Women's Studies, and she says she has a heart for work with women. Abigail is not a tutor because it would be a conflict of interest, but she completed tutor training with me.

think when my children were little, of course it was a different, different perspective, and when I was younger and in college, it was a different perspective" (Abigail 1.13). Rosa,<sup>74</sup> an instructor, indicates that her way of thinking about literacy has changed significantly since she began as a tutor. She says, "It's changed. It's definitely changed over these past three months. Literacy to me used to just mean being able to read something, but now it's so much more" (Rosa 1.9). After working with her learner for just three months, Rosa believes that literacy includes confidence in one's abilities as well as the access it provides to new learning. Michelle,<sup>75</sup> a coordinator at County, believes that the meaning she uses is suitable for the moment, and sees the possibility of change over the next three years. She shares,

What come to mind for me is reading, writing and English as a second language. And the reason for that is, it's the, that's sort of the definition of community literacy right now. . . I expect that definition will change actually, and in three years, if I'm still involved in this field, I'll be thinking of it as reading, writing, English as a second language and math, and numeracy, . . . because there's a trend to go towards that. (Michelle 1.7)

Michelle bases her understanding on her current position in County Literacy, but she is aware of and comfortable with the ways literacy will be conceptualized in the future. She sees herself as part of the field, although she does not suggest that she does or will have influence over meaning.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>74</sup> Rosa is a 35-year old Caucasian female. She says her love of reading triggered her involvement as a tutor. Rosa had wanted to be a tutor for a while when she was working but found it difficult to find the time. Then she lost her marketing job in May 2009. She discovered the program through her involvement with President Obama's volunteer campaign. Starting with a Google search, she found information about the program online and emailed one of the coordinators. After completing her tutor training in June 2009, she began working with her first learner in July and says, "She was very inspiring to me" (Rosa 1.3). Rosa has experience as a volleyball coach, but she has never been a part of literacy tutoring.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>75</sup> Michelle is a Caucasian female and the Program Coordinator for County Literacy. She moved to the state six years ago. After graduating from college in 2002, she joined the Americorps Vista Program before joining County Literacy. She has been with the program seven years, and her main role with the program is coordinating training for the volunteer tutors and organizing sensitivity trainings and community trainings for local employers. Michelle is responsible for handling data management, keeping track of learner goals, coordinating the agency newsletter and learner newsletter, conducting literacy assessments of new learners, and placing learners with their tutors.

Sponsors are part of a vast network of reciprocal influence with practitioners and theorists, government institutions and private agencies, individuals and groups. The literacy programs in this study have a variety of sponsors such as tutors, instructors, counselors, coordinators, and directors, and these participants are not operating in isolation. They are part of an organized, monitored, and hierarchical community. Tutors and instructors are responsible to those who hire them, and their employers and supervisors expect them to teach using the guidelines of the program. For example, basic literacy tutors at County Literacy must attend a 15-hour workshop in order to be certified to teach in a one-on-one situation. Coordinators pair them with learners, and tutors submit monthly reports on standardized forms. Mentors check in regularly with tutors to answer questions and offer guidance. Tutors must conform to the demands of the sponsor, and so the program shapes their ideas about literacy. For example, Rosa feels unprepared for her learner's goal relating to math since this was not a part of tutor training. She says, "Well, I forgot to mention the importance of math and how I think it got introduced because we weren't taught in our training to do math, and I know I was kind of warned it could be brought up. It could be something that we'd have to teach. But she wants to open a bank account" (Rosa 1.12-13). The program has conditioned her to think of literacy development in a particular way, so she is surprised when the learner asks her to reconsider her role.

While sponsors apprentice each other, shaping understandings of literacy for the group, the influence that each sponsor has is not necessarily equal. For example, sometimes the federal government makes decisions that it expects all literacy providers to follow, as Allison points out in reference to grant funding (Allison 1.15). This does not mean that sponsors cannot disagree with each other. Sometimes sponsors push to influence bigger sponsors, such as when County Literacy pushes back against powerful government sponsors. Abigail mentions different kinds of literacy and states that there is a "culture clash" among them: education/academic literacy, research-based literacy, and community literacy. While County Literacy focuses on community literacy, "community literacy is kind of a dirty business by comparison. *(laughs)* Because you know we're really out there in the trenches um, and with, I mean no resources, really, if you think about it. Um, we have a budget, a cash budget of under \$400,000" (Abigail 1.6-7). She

suggests that the ways that the program thinks about literacy are significantly different from the ways the government, schools, or researchers think about it. Literacy work with ABE and ESL populations is not considered neat and tidy, with easy metrics and quantification. Learners come as they are and are encouraged to take charge of their own learning, aiming to make literacy individualized. She has to battle the opinions of other sponsors to support community literacy, and in doing so, County Literacy does not qualify for certain federal government funding.

All of the sponsors demonstrate an acute awareness of their own understandings of literacy in the context of other sponsors' understandings. Their literacy meta-discourse shows familiarity with the ways that literacy has been understood over time and a willingness to question and revise definitions of literacy based on their experiences and the influences of other sponsors. While sponsors may not share the same definition of literacy, their relationships and interactions with each other provide a community for developing a critical and reflective discourse around literacy.

#### Learners and Literacy Meta-Discourse

Typically, sponsors do not include learners in their community of deliberate critical discourse surrounding literacy. Instead, learners must develop their literacy metadiscourse primarily using their experiences with current and past literacy events and practices, and this has significant consequences. Many learners arrive in adult literacy programs focusing on what is missing from their lives. They have had years of exposure to negative judgments about their literacy, primarily through the most powerful literacy sponsor, the compulsory education system (Quigley, 1998). Learners in my study have abundant accounts of negative schooling and literacy experiences that they faced throughout their lives, experiences that might be related to their current understandings of literacy. Historically, learners have been grouped in classrooms with others who also struggle with literacy, and so it seems unavoidable that negative associations of literacy have been compounded in groups that typically have experienced failure. Learners' experiences and feelings about school, however, differ in the two programs, although they both feel that schooling let them down in some way.

Regional students, for the most part, cite forces related to difficult schooling experiences that are not directly linked to struggles with literacy. Students mention pregnancy, violence, care of sick relatives, regular relocation, peer pressure, and depression as factors in their decisions to leave high school. Most feel they were doing well academically before leaving, and the chief anxiety among all of them is passing the mathematics test component of the GED certification. In fact, many attest to loving many things relating to literacy. Renee considers herself a reader (Renee 1.7), Devin describes English as his best subject in high school (Devin 1.6), and Sarah says she loved reading in school (Sarah 1.8). These positive descriptions of literacy seem contradictory to some of their responses that show a lack of familiarity with the term *literacy* and a discomfort when discussing it.<sup>76</sup>

Negative thoughts about literacy appear closely connected with what happens when learners attempt to enter college or gain employment without the institutional cultural capital of a high school diploma. Although many see themselves as readers and writers (if not mathematicians), they are denied jobs and college admission (or even a chance to apply) because they lack a diploma or GED certification. They feel judged, frustrated that people make decisions about their literate abilities based on a single document. For instance, Todd is an avid reader of fantasy fiction and history and feels that he can handle a number of jobs like working in a library, but his literacy skills are undocumented. He says his typical interview experience goes, "Well, usually, when I applied for a job, nobody would call me back because I didn't have a GED" (Todd 1.10).

Students with alternate certification also experience rejection. For example, Bethany has a college certificate as a medical assistant, but no diploma, and so she is often turned down. She feels like she fights a losing battle. She remembers, "I just actually went to an interview the other day, and he was kind of looking like, Well, you ain't got really no schooling. And I'm like, Actually, I do. I graduated college before high school" (Bethany 1.6). Bethany challenges the system in which literacy is tied to the diploma and fails. What she counts as an amazing success—college-level accreditation without high school documentation—others view as failure. Her efforts to challenge the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>76</sup> Both Renee and Devin, for example, do not offer a meaning of *literacy* when asked for one in their interviews.

system are repeatedly rebuffed. Students know the stigma of not graduating high school, resist the judgment others have for them, and become frustrated when they are unable to persuade sponsors like college admissions and employers of their literacy. They are forced to feel impoverished, even when they feel that their literate abilities are valuable and should be accepted without traditional documentation.

More than half of County Literacy learners, however, possess diplomas, in spite of their difficult school lives. They sometimes do not value their diplomas, seeing them as accidents, the results of the efforts of others. Daron says, "I was taught how to pass" (Daron 1.4), and Colyn and Thaddeus say that they do not value their diplomas because they feel they did not earn them. Trisha has similar sentiments: "I think I should have stayed there [in high school], and I shouldn't accept my diploma" (Trisha 13.6). She is convinced that an extra year of study would have helped her improve her literacy, and that she should have refused the school's diploma, accepting it only when she was better prepared. School was a difficult time for learners, when their struggles with literacy became apparent to them and others. They were isolated in special education classes where they found support, but sometimes felt like they were not really learning. For example, Thaddeus took special education courses in middle school through high school but says, "Personally, I think they just pushed me out. I just think they just carried me up to the next level just to get me out of there" (Thaddeus 1.5). He felt unwanted.

Learners' history with literacy institutions complicates the development of their literacy meta-discourse. Their failed experiences in high school, their rejection from employers and colleges, and their embarrassment from daily literate interactions offer confusing and contradictory information. Both sets of learners understand literacy as something distinct from a diploma. Regional learners can feel literate without a diploma, but they feel frustrated when sponsors do not recognize the value of what they do possess. County learners can feel illiterate with a diploma, seeing themselves as impoverished in literate resources and cultural capital. Those at County do not value what they have, and those at Regional cannot get others to value what they do have.

The learners in their interviews show various levels of engagement with literacy meta-discourse from avoidance to complex engagement, and they often link their critical knowledge with their motivation and success. Learners acquire and develop literacy

meta-discourse in spite of difficult circumstances and obstacles. They are not immersed in the contemplative communities like sponsors, and they lack access to publications about literacy, because they cannot read them or are perhaps even unaware they exist. Still, they invest in literacy based on what they understand, believing that they can move from an undesirable state of diminished resources to a state of reliable and readily available resources.

#### What Sponsors Say about Learners

Because I had limited interaction with adult learners, I consulted sponsors concerning their impressions of learners' understandings of the term *literacy*. Several sponsors state that learners never use the term in their presence.<sup>77</sup> This could suggest that learners had no experience with the term or that they were uncomfortable using it in the presence of sponsors. In either case, they were not taking up literacy meta-discourse in ways that sponsors noticed. Katrina comments on her students at Regional, saying "That word never comes up. . . No. That's not in their vocabulary" (Katrina 1.13-14). She follows by saying, "In fact, I often give them a word of the day. So far we've done some of my favorites like serendipity and serenity and tranquility, um, those are some words that I've used. Maybe I'll use literacy this next coming week" (Katrina 1.14). Katrina feels like she would have to introduce the term to them, as if for the first time. She also notes that she has offered them her favorite vocabulary words in the past, but not this one, even though she assumes it is not part of their vocabulary. Perhaps she felt they were not interested or did not need it, but she is willing to introduce it to them, potentially giving them an opportunity to demonstrate and develop their meta-discourse. Her answer also suggests that students may not use the term because sponsors do not use it with them, perhaps unconsciously restricting their access to conversations about literacy.

Sponsors form opinions on learners' meta-knowledge of literacy, even when they do not engage them or observe them in active conversation on literacy. Sharice,<sup>78</sup> in a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>77</sup> All three sponsors discussed at length here are from Regional's GED program. County tutors have far less access to multiple learners. For example, Amanda, who had tutored several learners, did state "I have never had anybody use the term literacy" (Amanda 1.12), but Rosa could not comment because she was a very recent tutor.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>78</sup> Sharice is a Caucasian female who has been teaching with the GED program for six years. Her career started when she was a nanny and attending college to be a psychologist. Sharice enjoyed the teaching

much longer interchange, not only suggests that students in her class are unfamiliar with the term but that they do not think about the concept:

*Randy:* Have you ever heard your students in their conversations with each other or their conversations with you, actually use the term *literacy*?

Sharice: No.

Randy: Okay.

- *Sharice:* They do not think the GED is literacy. They, they generally, if they're in this class, they don't think about the idea of literacy.
- *Randy:* Okay. Are they imagining that as what? High school diploma? What, how are they thinking about that?

*Sharice:* Honestly, I don't think that they do think about it.

Randy: Okay.

*Sharice:* I don't think that they, they think about the concept of how well do I read? They think of the concept, can I get through this? You know what's the material? Can I understand this? Can I pass the test? But they don't think of it as in terms of how well do I read?

Randy: Uh-hmm.

Sharice: Um, even though we do go over the concept of reading and retaining information in class, and I do try and stress it, and I think all teachers try and stress the idea of reading and retaining what you've read, I don't think the students that are here really comprehend the idea of literacy and being literacy, literate. (Sharice 1.12)

Sharice's own definition of literacy is reading and success in an academic setting (Sharice 1.12). She indicates that students' focus is not on literacy but on the goal of passing the tests. Her interpretation is that learners are preoccupied with the demands of the GED and do not have time or energy to invest in something more abstract; instead, their resources are dedicated to the successful pay-off of passing the series of tests for

work and decided to teach like her husband and many members of her extended family. One of her goals in teaching is for her students to" to make them feel successful and comfortable in a classroom" (Sharice 1.7).

their GED certification. More importantly, she believes that teachers emphasize "reading and retaining," but the students ignore or reject this understanding.

What is unclear from this discussion is upon what grounds Sharice makes this determination about student understanding of literacy. If students do not use the term and do not engage in conversation about reading, then how does one determine a student's level of understanding? She notices the dominant focus of student conversations, their attention to passing the tests, and seems to have given up on the idea that learners can actively and productively engage in meta-discourse relating to reading. Sharice believes that both she and others teachers "try and stress it," but she feels like the students cannot comprehend the meaning and value of literacy.

Sponsors appear bothered by the lack of conversation around literacy but do not know how to engage learners. Marcy, a program counselor at Regional, echoes some of Sharice's observations and assumptions. When asked if students come in to her to talk about their literacy, she replies,

I mean the ones that are struggling with that wouldn't have even heard the word literacy. I think they can all see a value in reading. I'm not so sure in writing. But no, I think what they're looking for is, is a way out. So we kind of give them literacy, so to speak, but that's not, I don't think that's their goal. They, a lot of them come in and they, they get really frustrated. They just want to take the test. (Marcy 1.13)

Marcy feels that students who are struggling with literacy do not hear the word in conversation, suggesting that other more competent students would have more exposure and awareness. She feels that students are far more focused on passing the test than contemplating an abstract concept like literacy. Her choice of words, "we kind of give them literacy, so to speak," indicates that sponsors are focused on the capital of literacy more than the capital of literacy meta-discourse. She does not deny that learners value reading, but she believes that their focus is on completion. Perhaps students are resisting any efforts that suggest they are not already literate. Like Bethany, they may see themselves as lacking a diploma, not lacking literacy. Even with the adjustments the program makes, students still become frustrated.

The sponsors interviewed suggest that learners do not discuss, comprehend, or contemplate the concept of literacy. Sponsors do not have evidence of a literacy metadiscourse, and any attempts that they make to engage students in discussion about literacy seem to frustrate the students, so they cease trying. They focus on the development of literacy itself, interpreting student resistance and frustration as proof that students do not wish to know more about literacy and see meta-knowledge as a distraction from the real pay-off—literacy. It is important to note, however, that the conclusions that these sponsors have drawn are based more on observation rather than sustained dialogue with learners about literacy.

## Avoidance

Interviews with several learners support the views of sponsors that some learners are not comfortable engaging in a discussion of the term *literacy*. Some learners appear stumped by the word, unable to provide a response on demand. Other learners ask me to help or to give them assurance that their responses are acceptable. Deliberate focus on literacy reveals a real struggle to interrogate its meaning.

Interviews with learners confirm that they are not as familiar with the term *literacy* or as comfortable discussing it as sponsors are. No learner mentions the term *literacy* before I do, and many use the term only in response to my specific question using the term.<sup>79</sup> One learner, Leonard, has a hard time even pronouncing the word: "people will let's say, they're more about a tutor. Like, like what they do here. And it could have been, I, I don't think it was County Liter, Literacy. I can't pronounce the name, but I don't think it was them" (Leonard 1.3). It does not seem to be a word he says often, even though it is part of the name of the program in which he is enrolled.

Other learners confirm that the word is not a part of their conversations, even in classroom settings. When asked "What comes to mind when you hear the term literacy? What do you think of if you ever hear the word literacy?" Renee responds,

*Renee:* Um, I don't know (*laughs*). *Randy:* And that's a valid answer. *Renee:* (*laughs*) I, I don't know.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>79</sup> This does not include references to County Literacy.

Randy: Do you, do you hear it talked about in this class, Renee: I don't ever hear it, Randy: or...? Renee: No. Randy: No. Okay. Renee: No. (Renee 1.8)

No matter what reassurance I offer or how I try to encourage her to respond, she does not provide an understanding. She does not ask me to clarify the term or engage my discourse, but asserts that she never hears the word.

Devin has a similar response:

*Randy:* Okay. Um, this is the question that I told you I ask everyone but I, I don't tell you in advance. And that is, what comes to mind when you hear the word *literacy*?

Devin: Wow.

Randy: What does that make you think of?

Devin: You know I, right now, I don't know if I can answer that (laughs).

Randy: A lot of people have said that exact same thing, so don't worry. So

uh if nothing comes to mind, then nothing is connected.

Devin: Uh-hmm. (Devin 1.12)

His initial response of "Wow" suggests a surprise and perhaps a sense of being overwhelmed. Devin did not present himself as being shy or lacking confidence during the interview. Just a few minutes before, he shared intimate details about his incarceration, but he finds commenting on literacy to be intimidating. Devin suggests that his difficulty is connected with the immediate moment, "right now," perhaps indicating that, given time, he could provide a response. At the end of the interview, however, when I ask if he has anything else to add, he also does not return to the topic. Neither Renee nor Devin spoke the word *literacy* during their interviews.

Some learners offer more extended comment on the term *literacy* but seem to come no closer to providing a meaning than those who reply "I don't know." Catlyn uses the word several times in the interview, usually to reference County Literacy, but she draws a blank when I ask her what it means:

- *Randy:* Okay. Um, there's another question here. Oh, here's the question that I'm asking to, to everybody, um, but without letting them know beforehand; what comes to mind when you hear the word literacy?
- *Catlyn:*Um, I would say (*pause*) I really don't know. It, it, when literacy comes up, it just, I, it's just a blank (*laughs*).
- *Randy:* All right, so there are no other words or no pictures that come to your mind

Catlyn:No.

*Randy:* when you hear, like it's in the, the name of the, the program, right? *Catlyn:*Uh-hmm.

Randy: County Literacy. So it just seems,

*Catlyn:* Yeah, it seems like a normal word to me. (Catlyn 1.5) She emphasizes her lack of knowledge by saying "I *really* don't know," after pausing, suggesting that she has taken a moment to ponder its meaning. Catlyn says that when she encounters the word "It's just a blank." She resists any encouragement from me to think more about the term. She has joined County Literacy "So like, so my reading and my writing level would be up to standards for Regional. To get into the program I want to get into" (Catlyn 1.6). Although she is aware that the program addresses reading and writing, she does not associate them with the term *literacy*. Catlyn has attached no meaning to the term, so it cannot be a substantial part of her meta-knowledge.

The term *literacy* is a mystery to several of the adult learners. This lack of familiarity and usage would make engaging in critical literacy discourse with sponsors difficult. These learners are able to discuss the concept of literacy (for example, reading and writing) when the term is not used, but this requires others to adapt the ways they think about literacy, rather than allowing these learners to dialogue is less restricted ways. They must rely on the "kindness" of others.

# **Tentative Engagement**

The number of learners who avoid the term *literacy* in our interviews, however, is small in comparison with those who engage me in critical conversations around the term

and concept, although levels of engagement vary significantly. Some learners offer responses that explain their understanding of the term *literacy*, but they also indicate that they are uncertain about the meanings they provide. This might relate to being nervous in the interview, to an unexpected transition from a previous topic or question, or to a lack of confidence. The hesitancy might also relate to the dynamic of the interviewerinterviewee relationship. Learner responses often suggest a desire to satisfy me, a sponsor, with a useful answer in the interview. The uncertainty might also suggest a lack of command over the term. Sarah prefaces her response with "I'm probably going to say this completely wrong" (Sarah 1.10), as if to excuse a potentially incorrect answer. Bethany answers,

*Bethany:* Mm, I would have to say school. Like teachers in general, like a English teacher anyway.

*Randy:* Okay. So literacy has to do with schooling? *Bethany:* Yes, I believe. I'm not really for sure, but *Randy:* Okay. There's no right answer to this. *Bethany:* (*laughs*) (Bethany 1.11)

Bethany provides her response and then confirms it with me before saying that she is uncertain of her response. Her meanings become narrower as she explains herself, moving from school to teachers to specifically English teachers. When I go back to the broadest category of schooling, she hedges with "Yes, I believe. I'm not really for sure" and laughs (nervously) when I let her know there is no correct answer. *Literacy* is not unheard of, but she does not feel secure defining it. She is acquainted with the term, but it is not a regular part of her discourse.

Other learners do choose a meaning but seem uncertain of its validity. Learners sometimes hedge and avoid taking authority in discussing meaning, while sponsors assert their understandings. For example, Leonard offers learning as a meaning for literacy, but his full response shows that he is not confident:

Leonard: The word literacy, what do that? I can only give you what I think Randy: Yes. Leonard: what, what it, what it, what it's telling me is learning.

Randy: Okay.

*Leonard:* Literacy I don't, I, the word *literacy*, I'm not sure what it mean, but I'm taking it as learning.

Randy: Okay.

*Leonard:* Teaching something that teaching me. Something that maybe you know what it meant but I don't *[laughs]* really know what the word 'literacy' mean, but I'm looking at it as learning, but maybe you can tell me what it mean.

*Randy:* Oh um, a couple of people have simply said I don't know.

Leonard: I'll say,

Randy: and they left it at that.

*Leonard:* literacy is learning.

Randy: Okay. (Leonard 1.20)

He begins by suggesting that his answer is representative of only his thoughts, a move that is common among those who do not see themselves as powerful enough to make assertions (Bartholomae, 1985). Leonard offers the synonym *learning* several times, and he has associations with teaching, but as he speaks, his responses become less tentative. He starts with "what it's telling me is learning," then moves to "I'm taking it as learning" and "I'm looking at it as learning." He ends with "I'll say literacy is learning." He rejects my offer to say that he does not know, as others have done. While his level of confidence might not be very high, he is not willing to suggest that he has no understanding of the term.

One must be careful, however, not to over-generalize based on these responses marked by uncertainty. Learners showing hesitation in these excerpts does not mean that they always approach literacy meta-discourse with tentative engagement. For example, although Leonard's response above demonstrates hedging, he is clearly engaging in reflection and analysis of the term, moving from a place of uncertainty to a more confident assertion of the meaning of literacy. He invites me into the dialogue, saying "maybe you can tell me what it mean," an opportunity for co-construction of meaning and development of his (and my) literacy meta-discourse. Tentative engagement is still engagement and evidence of learners' literacy meta-discourse.

#### **Selective Engagement**

When learners hesitate, hedge, or shift their answers while trying to explain literacy, they are wrestling with meaning. As with Leonard, some learners, in their attempts to manage the concept of literacy, have clearly selected and accepted particular understandings that they have gleaned from sponsors or public views of literacy. Historically, powerful sponsors have conceptualized literacy with an all-or-nothing model: people can read and write or they cannot. While some recognition has been given to varying proficiencies, the binary categories of literate and illiterate remain strong. Both sponsors and learners in this study acknowledge that this model exists, and several learners focus exclusively on inability or absence. Instead of altering or rejecting this concept, they use it as motivation to move from rags to riches, from illiteracy to literacy, from less to more capital. Their literacy meta-discourse demonstrates a creative reappropriation of the label *illiterate*, not removing its negative connotations, but softening and altering its stigma.

Sponsors are aware of the stigma, but sometimes use deficit language like *illiteracy* when discussing literacy. When asked, "What comes to mind when you hear the word *literacy*?"Abigail, the director of County Literacy says, "Well, these days (*laughs*,) these days, what comes to mind is people who cannot, who do not have literacy. . . .because I'm so aware and, and so close to the problem, um, it's, it's shocking to be aware of how many people cannot read and that's a hidden problem for many" (Abigail 1.13). Her close involvement, possibly her regular focus on enrollment numbers and meeting contributing sponsor requirements, leads her to dwell on the negative.

The director from the Regional GED program echoes this sentiment when she says that

the federal government at this point defines literacy for, for, in terms of um grant funding as anybody who reads or reads or does math below a ninth grade level or does not have a high school diploma or GED. And, if, if you don't have, if there's, if you have something missing in that, in those categories, that's illiteracy for, for their purposes. (Allison 1.15)

This approach concentrates on the human and cultural capital that adults do not have. It is reminiscent of the federal poverty measures that determine eligibility for certain financial aid. The federal government sets a ninth grade literacy level as the border that separates the literate from the illiterate. Allison chooses to think and speak about the deficit rather than the competence, focusing on falling below ninth grade rather than qualifying. Perhaps her work again affects her outlook, since she only accepts students who qualify under the deficit definition.

Allison 's literacy meta-discourse incorporates this grade-level classification system as well, just with different standards. She says, "The only thing I'd add about illiteracy is there are also some other categories. I see anybody that reads below the sixth grade level, that's, they're really in trouble" (Allison 1.16). She sees this group of learners as pre-GED and says that they do not fit in the regular GED program. While she seems to offer some empathy, recognizing the trouble learners endure, she is focused on what is missing in these learners' lives.

Some learners have adopted this focus on deficit. Unlike sponsors, however, they do not demonstrate an awareness that other meanings exist. Their responses suggest that they have accepted a single understanding, developing their literacy meta-discourse around that selective meaning. Even though I never mention *illiteracy* during interviews, many learners begin their discussions from an understanding that literacy involves lack or absence. At Regional, when asked about literacy, Maria asks a question in return: "Literacy, like that you can't read or write?" (Maria 1.10). She is unsure of her answer but still leans toward the negative associations: "I just think, I don't know why, I, that's just what comes to my mind is I hear when people, or is that being able to write, like where they can't write? I don't know. *(laughs)* Like I'm sorry *(laughs)*" (Maria 1.10). Maria wonders if the term relates to what people can do or what they cannot do. This is her understanding, but she is not confident and even apologizes at the end of her response. Maria gravitates toward inabilities as her understanding but does not know why.

Several learners have accepted this negative orientation and seem to find motivation in their identification with illiteracy. They have reframed the stigmatizing label of *illiterate* so that it can describe but nor demean them. Seeing the glass as half

empty does not create a feeling of hopelessness in these learners when they acknowledge their struggles because they know of techniques that can help them cope. These learners hear the term *literacy* and think of difficulty but not impossible difficulty. Thaddeus had strongly negative associations that softened over time. He shares the following:

*Thaddeus:* When I first heard of it [literacy], it's people that couldn't read. *Randy:* Uh-hmm. And has, is that meaning changed for you now? *Thaddeus:* I think it's just people that need help. A little extra help. (Thaddeus 1.7).

Thaddeus focuses on reading ability (no mention of writing), but he has a kinder focus, associating literacy with people who struggle a bit and need assistance. He modifies his concept of literacy but only in terms of positive outcomes.

Antoinette echoes Thaddeus's sentiments when discussing literacy. She thinks of "somebody that needs help. Somebody who is incapable of doing things on their own, and they really need somebody else to show them how to do it, be directed the right way. (*Pauses*) I think that's it" (Antoinette 1.6). While she indicates a lack of both ability and independence, she also suggests that literacy is associated with a hopeful future, a possibility of finding help and moving in the right direction. The literacy meta-discourse of these learners suggests that adult learners are those who lack literate resources, but with some informed assistance, they can invest in a brighter future. This resembles the perspective of so many adult literacy programs that invite learners to admit their need or acknowledge their illiteracy with the promise of literacy in return.

While grappling with the meaning of literacy, some learners can take up the harshest of perspectives. For example, Colyn offers the most intensely negative description of literacy work of all the participants, conceptualizing literacy as a "handicap":

*Randy:* Um, and you used the term literacy, um, when you were talking about uh, the challenges there. What comes to mind, or what do you think of when you hear the, the term literacy?*Colyn:* Literacy meaning, I'm thinking reading*Randy:* Uh-hmm.

- *Colyn:* along the way. I think literacy as far as, probably could be reading, math, just certain things you're slow at.
- Colyn: You know, I can have illiteracy in algebra, right? So I think that it's, there's a certain handicap. You know, I think as far as I'm concerned, I think everyone's handicapped in their own way. Randy: Uh-hmm.
- *Colyn:* Some people will not admit of handicap. I think the whole term of literacy is kind of like used for so long. I'm surprised they didn't say handicap. (Colyn 1.13)

This excerpt is strong evidence of Colyn's literacy meta-discourse, his awareness and analysis of the meaning of literacy. Colyn uses "I think" a number of times, providing himself as the authority but also shying away from direct assertions of meaning. He begins by considering reading and then math before establishing the meaning as a generalized deficiency: "just certain things you're slow at." He goes on to state, "I am surprised they didn't say handicap," with "they" possibly referring to literacy sponsors, which might indicate that he does not identify with sponsors. He easily shifts to the term *illiteracy* and then the term *handicap*. While he recognizes that people resist the idea of being handicapped, he thinks it is an appropriate term, applying *handicap* to everyone, perhaps leveling the field. If every person is handicapped in some way, and it is all just a matter of degree, then being handicapped is not only universal but normal. The universal skill of literacy has been re-imagined as a universal handicap. He has internalized the term and applied it to himself and everyone else.

Colyn continues to use *handicap* later in the interview:

*Colyn:* You know, literacy is such a big, sophisticated word, that we, that I hear a lot.

Randy: I mean it's in the title County Literacy,

Colyn: Yeah.

Randy: Yeah.

*Colyn:* But, you know, whatever it is, literacy or something, we could have been saying handicap. Hey I, I knew I needed help, and I

came to the right place. And I think that word will be there for a long time

Randy: Uh-hmm.

*Colyn:* you know, no matter what. I mean people, some people can say ignorance or violent or whatever. But in reality, I know some people probably are ignorant and have handicaps of their own. (Colyn 1.14)

Colyn says that he hears the word often, but he does not specify when and where (although he is enrolled in County Literacy). *Literacy* is a "big, sophisticated word" in Colyn's opinion, which might suggest that he recognizes its complexity or that he finds its meaning inaccessible. He offers *handicap* as a synonym, but he also suggests that the term in the organization's name helped him to know it was the right place for him. County Literacy or *County Handicap* lets him know that it was about helping handicapped learners. He is not the only handicapped person; others are simply unaware and ignorant or, as he mentioned before, "Some people will not admit of handicap."

In his follow-up interview, Colyn continues to use the handicap metaphor to tell his story. He says, "Some person next door might think I'm stupid because I may not know every single word they might; I might not be to their standards. For myself, I'm not going to sell myself short. Just certain things I'm handicapped in but this, there's other things that I can [do to] correct that handicap" (Colyn 2.12). He internalizes his handicap and moves on to do the things he needs to correct or overcome that handicap. His literacy meta-discourse is restricted to seeing literacy through a lens of deficiency, but he has found a way to use the term *handicap* to contextualize his literacy and motivate him to develop it.

The literacy meta-discourse of these learners relies on a single sponsor perspective of literacy. They identify with illiteracy, choosing to see themselves and others like them as deficient. They do not resist this identification but find ways to use it to motivate their literacy learning. By accepting their deficiency, these learners believe that they gain power to alter their situations.

## **Complex Engagement**

Some learners gravitate toward a single understanding of literacy, while others have developed or appear to be in the process of developing more complex understandings that involve focusing on the relationship between reading and writing and the role that literacy has in the specific contexts of their lives. This is not to suggest that they have articulated fully formed theories of literacy as practices. Learners tend to talk about reading more than writing and they exclusively focus on print, not unlike many sponsors. However, they also discuss concepts of functional literacy (without using that term) and provide resistance to understandings of literacy that they cannot accept.

Sponsors often think of literacy as the practices of reading and writing, emphasizing contexts and potentials. For example, Amanda, a tutor, has a complex understanding that aligns with the concept of literacy as multiple practices. Reading and writing are connected with activities and contexts, and they have value in action, not in the abstract:

> To me it means being able to read and write and all the things that go along with that. Like not only just being able to read the words, but read things that are meaningful to you or that um give yourself enjoyment or information or that kind of thing that, and that you can, that you can read well enough to gain that from the stuff that you read. . . So it's, you know it's, it's, I guess it's beyond just being able to know that these, you know, what these words are and but to do, do something more with that. (Amanda 1.14)

She begins with the most traditional of understandings of literacy—reading and writing and moves beyond the monolithic concept. She emphasizes a utility in reading, of being able to use what you read for information or enjoyment. Reading gives access to something; it is a means not an end. Literacy is also something individualized; it is meaningful to the person.

Learners do not always elaborate on their concepts of reading and writing in the ways that sponsors do, but they are making connections. A few learners think about education-related meanings, concepts associated with reading and writing, when asked to talk about literacy. Leonard thinks of learning and being taught. Rachel thinks of learning

and knowledge, and says, "Mm, like just learning and what you know. It's, it's what I, what comes to mind, usually, when I think of that" (Rachel 1.6). Her response suggests that she does think about literacy and that she has a usual meaning. Tim associates literacy with books, but says nothing else about the term. These understandings resemble the older meanings associated with being educated, knowledgeable, and well-read.

Every learner comments on reading, writing, or a combination of the two, even those who do not supply meaning for the term *literacy*. As with many sponsors, there are those that focus exclusively on reading. While Daron, Thaddeus, and Colyn emphasized struggles relating to literacy, they all begin by associating it with reading. Sarah, although she is unsure of her answer, says, "I think of reading. That, that's the first thing that pops into my head" (Sarah 1.10). The association is immediate. Shania thinks of reading, but she is the only learner to mention comprehension while discussing literacy: "I think of reading and making sure that you understand how to read and understand English" (Shania 1.11).

No respondents focus on writing without reading. Vaughn, a learner at County, says, "I just, that's all that comes to mind is reading and writing" (Vaughn 1.8). Bruce begins with writing and then complicates his response. He says,

Writing because when you say the word 'literacy,' it, it can either be writing or reading because once you look at it, it's, it's basically saying, in so many words, like what, you have to just jump on reading. Reading and writing, because that's what it, it's telling me and it's explaining to me. (Bruce 1.12)

At first, he focuses on *writing*, then *writing or reading* and then *reading and writing*. He eventually includes both practices. His constant rewording and reordering might suggest an inability to separate the two practices, even though he tries to focus on writing. Bruce says, "you have to just jump on reading," as if he is forced to include it, even though he initially tries to restrict his explanation to writing. He demonstrates literacy meta-discourse in action, analyzing his own words as he speaks them, unable to casually provide a pat response.

Learners go further than recognizing the relationship between literacy and reading/ writing. They think about and analyze the role that reading and writing have in

their lives, often adopting the concept of functional literacy. In their interviews, learners think about the ways that reading and writing practices will help them to survive and thrive in their worlds. Hunter and Harman (1979) offer this definition of functional literacy: "the ability to read and write adequately to satisfy the requirements *they set for themselves* as being important for their own lives; the ability to deal positively with demands made on them by society; and the ability to solve the problems they face in their daily lives" (p. 8). This understanding of functional literacy has remained a part of sponsor discourse, and several learner responses suggest that they embrace this understanding.

Functional literacy is evident throughout interviews with many sponsors, and it is a part of their literacy meta-discourse. Shirley, an instructor, sees literacy as essential to daily survival: "I guess I think of really being able to live in the world. I think it's, it's so essential to being able to do the simplest things. . . So I think literacy affects the person on so many levels, you know um, not just, certainly not just with school or education. I think it's just so essential for daily functioning and daily tasks" (Shirley 1.16). Literacy is not just for school, but it is essential for everyday survival. Marcy, a counselor, states,

> We keep telling the students that struggle with math that they need to improve their reading skills so they can really figure out what are they asking me? What's the final question? What's the final answer? So I guess to me, that's what literacy is. It's, it's, you can't function without it. If you can't, I mean we require eighth grade reading level. You can function with that. (Marcy 1.12).

She emphasizes the value of reading in providing access to success in other areas like math, but she has a clear idea that a functioning level of literacy is an eighth grade reading level. Both of these references to functional literacy, however, suggest that the concept applies to learners, not to sponsors. Shirley refers to "the person," not herself or all people. Marcy thinks specifically of the students in the Regional program and ends with "You can function with that," again separating herself from the concept. Functional literacy seems relegated to learners' lives, not sponsors'.

Several learners in this study articulate a clear understanding of functional literacy. Jennifer discusses the way that reading provides access to learning: "But see,

reading helps, I learned reading was the key, so that's why I'm putting most of, that's why it's mostly that I'm looking highly at my reading . . . for education purposes" (Jennifer 1.5). The function of reading is to provide educational opportunities. Other learners see reading and writing as important in their everyday activities, not just as a school-based phenomenon. Julian, who feels confident about his reading and writing abilities, says,

I mean to be able to read and write, it's like being, being able to get through life more easily. Okay, because you know, you've got to, there's just so many instances where, you know, whether you're in the store, whether you meet somebody on the street, whether you need to communicate with somebody, like somebody in trouble. Hey, you know, literacy, reading and writing, all that stuff comes into play. (Julian 1.17)

Literacy is required in multiple common places and situations, whether it shopping or assisting someone in an emergency. Julian thinks of reading and writing as aids to successful living.

Some learners emphasize how literacy functions in the workplace. When asked "In terms of reading and writing, how important are they to the kind of goals that you have?" Shania responds,

They're *very* important, because if I didn't know how to read or understand um, reading, I don't think I could do my job. And same thing, I mean, with writing, especially nowadays, it's not as like it was when I was in school, very punctual. I mean, you have email; you're sitting at a typewriter. But still, at the same point in time, if you can't write down something um, and it comes across as you not knowing what you're talking about, people are like, they're not going to read it. They're not going to listen to you. So I think it's, I think they're very both important. (Shania 1.12)

The stakes are high when it comes to reading and writing. Shania feels that, not only do reading and writing help her do her job, but if not done well, people will ignore you. She recognizes the transactional value that writing has in the workplace (Brandt, 2009). The

people she refers to suggests those in authority, like an employer. To command attention requires functional literacy.

Functional literacy does not mean simply getting by in this world with the bare minimum. It also includes being able to improve your current situation in life. Leonard focuses on functional literacy in reading and states, "I realize reading, learning to read is a big, big thing to do in society because you need it according to life and how to get around" (Leonard 1.1). He sees reading as something that is necessary for navigating the world. He later shares a concrete example of what functional literacy looks like:

Leonard: Well, I see what the ability that I'm taking to learn how to read,

I feel good about it because it, it's a future that show you more life. More of life. It motivates you to make you see, it gives you interests

Randy: Uh-hmm.

*Leonard:* of, if I, you're reading show you that when you go to a restaurant to eat, you can enjoy the person who you're with, because you know what you're going to have to tell the person what you want,

Randy: Okay.

*Leonard:* the, the waitress. And it shows you yourself. It shows you what kind of mind you have. It shows you, you're intelligent.

Randy: Uh-hmm.

*Leonard:* Reading is ability that opens up the world to you. And not, don't, it don't only open up the world to you, but it opens up you to say, I've got this?

Randy: Uh-hmm.

*Leonard:* This is what's in my mind, because reading, when you read, you can take words and you can figure out other things or when you read you can take words and you can, it helps you think how to go further into life. And it makes you see a lot. It shows you a lot. *Randy:* Okay.

# *Leonard:* It opens your eyes. It give you a goal to make you want to just move on. (Leonard 1.11-12)

Leonard, who worked through his understanding of literacy aloud with some hedging, is not uncertain about the value he ascribes to reading. He shows how functional literacy works in a restaurant with reading menus, but his comments go further, suggesting that reading creates a bigger world. People are able to see and experience more of the world when they can read. People can set new goals for themselves and go on to achieve those goals.

Evidence of the complexity of learners' literacy meta-discourse is not just apparent in their longer articulations of the meaning of literacy, but it also appears in moments of resistance. Learners do not accept everything that sponsors and others tell them about literacy. While they may not be able to explain their rejection of ideas and sponsors or may not be provided an opportunity to do so, sponsors describe their resistance and learners clearly speak about it.

At times, sponsors intentionally try to shape learners' literacy understandings but have little success. They recognize that learners are resisting them and are sometimes frustrated by this resistance. For example, Marcy, a counselor, discusses counseling moments with students:

> *Marcy*: And, and we say, Well but, you know, your skills aren't high enough. And they still, they, they actually sometimes get angry. I just want to take the test. And I'm thinking well, but you can't read. You're not going to be able to take the test.

Randy: Uh-hmm.

Marcy: So.

- *Randy*: And do you, do you have like counseling moments with, with those students?
- *Marcy*: I do. Sometimes it's at orientation when I'm talking about their reading level. And what I usually say is, You know your reading level's not real high, and I, and I say, And I suspect you know that. I've never had anybody say, No. They all know it.

Randy: Okay.

*Marcy*: They know they can't read. And I think sometimes they're almost appreciative of an opportunity to not have to pretend.

Randy: Uh-hmm.

*Marcy*: I mean I just tell them right up front, You know, your, your reading is, is not very strong. It must be hard for you. How do you manage? What are your coping skills? Things like that. And then they will talk about it. I find most of these adult learners, if they come to class, they really can improve their reading. (Marcy 1.14)

Her sponsor discourse identifies the goal of improved reading as the path to successful completion of the GED certification, but the learners resist this concept and her urging. Marcy puts words in their mouths, saying, "You know your reading level's not real high." She pushes them toward accepting the sponsor perspective, believing they will improve if they begin to see the value of reading from her perspective. She interprets their silence or lack of denial as an acceptance of her counsel.

The reactions of students that Marcy describes, however, may be interpreted in different ways. Their anger could be resistance to her lack of cooperation, if they believe they are ready to take the test, but she is unwilling to give them a chance. When they don't challenge her, she sees this as them coming to accept their weak reading abilities. Perhaps they feel defeated and uninspired. Or they may feel that acquiescence will provide access to the tests. Amore positive interpretation could be that the dialogue about their literacy allows them to modify their own understandings of literacy, to develop their literacy meta-discourse.

Learners, however, do not accept every concept of literacy that comes their way. Their literacy meta-discourse is as much a creation of what they reject as what they embrace. For example, Julian, during the discussion of his understanding of literacy, feels the need to insist, "I am, I am not illiterate. No, not even a little bit" (Julian 1.16). He refuses to accept even the hint that he has any difficulty with his literacy. His later response suggests that he does not want to be associated with any academic struggles: "I kind of breezed through my, my tests on that. Uh, I'm very good at reading and writing" (Julian 1.16). Julian wants nothing to do with a negative representation of his abilities.

Other learners, such as Thaddeus, Antoinette, and Colyn, have adapted the *illiterate* term to motivate progress, but Julian will not.

Some learners talk about what the word means to others but seem not to have adopted a meaning for themselves. Jennifer is aware of what others think of literacy. She says, "I don't know. I don't know. I mean no, I don't, I just don't know because I don't know what the word *literacy*, I did, I don't have no insight of literacy. I, sometimes people, literacy means you're, you're dumb or you can't do this" (Jennifer 1.13). She is aware of the pejorative meanings that other people have about literacy; however, she rejects these negative views of literacy: "So I'm not thinking of that. When I went there, I'm like I feel welcome. They didn't turn me down . . . and when I went back, I was late and he still let me come, so County Literacy is cool (*laughs*)" (Jennifer 1.13). Her rejection is based on experience with the program and not on her own understanding of literacy. The accepting, positive welcome contradicts the judgment that "you're dumb or you can't do this," so she chooses not to accept the negative meaning without having a meaning to fill the gap. Some might argue that this was not logical evidence for rejecting the pejorative understanding, but it was the result of a comparative analysis that resisted the negative meaning.

The interviews with learners and sponsors clearly indicate that learners are aware of and think about literacy. Closer analyses of the words of sponsors show that their conclusions regarding literacy meta-discourse and learners are often inaccurate. They interpret learners' behaviors, words, and silences in narrow ways that are challenged by the words of learners and by learners' willingness and ability to dialogue with me about their literacy. Not all learners have identical understandings and proficiency in literacy meta-discourse, and sponsors, as a group, do seem better practiced, but learners demonstrate many of the same kinds of awareness and analysis that sponsors show. Learners recognize multiple meanings of literacy, its evolution, and the ways in which it influences their lives. Even so, learners have room to grow in gaining meta-discourse.

# **Daron's Literacy Meta-Discourse**

The categorization of learners' literacy meta-discourse might suggest that learners can be neatly labeled, so I examine one learner's meta-discourse to demonstrate the

complexity of their thinking about literacy and the ways that it can develop over time. I have selected Daron because he was one of the more gregarious interviewees, providing substantial dialogue for analysis from two interviews. Additionally, since I did not conduct a longitudinal study, I must rely on a learner who is able to comment on literacy learning over time.

Daron was 49 years old when I interviewed him and had been a part of County Literacy for about five years. He has spoken at fund-raising events and published his own writings in the program's magazines. Daron keeps a scrapbook of every publication that has mentioned him as well as copies of all of his recent college work and transcripts, showing them proudly to me. He is enrolled in Regional Community College, has already completed two technical programs, and is completing his associate's degree. His story and energy are inspirational, and his interviews show the complexity of his literacy metadiscourse.

Very early in our interview, Daron recalls that he once had a very negative view of his literacy. He only saw the deficit, the things that he could not do. He was about to lose his job and wondered, "If I don't read and write, who's going to want me?" (Daron 1.1). He admits that he once thought of himself as "dumb and stupid" (Daron 1.3). Daron's words suggest that he had a selective understanding of literacy.

Daron, however, did not adopt a defeatist attitude and chose instead to use his negative assessment as motivation. He says, "I actually wanted to do something for myself and that's the, the most, biggest thing that I want to tackle in life, and do" (Daron 1.3). Like Colyn, he realizes that there are others like him: "Some of the movie stars, some of the richest people in the world, just, it's unreal to find out how many people actually have some sort of disorder in reading and writing" (Daron 1.3). He is fascinated by the progress and success that people with disorders (his word) can achieve and draws great inspiration from their stories while focusing on the negative. When asked if he graduated high school, he responds, "Yeah. I graduated like this. Yeah, absolutely" (Daron 1.4) He uses "like this" as if he were defective.

Much of Daron's reflection on his literacy relies on negative terminology, such as *illiteracy* and *problem*:

Daron: You know, I never even knew that word existed until I started with County Literacy. I never knew what literacy meant.

Randy: Right.

Daron: So that, that's where I started at five years ago. I never heard of the word before. Literacy? What's literacy mean? So then working with CS, that's who I've worked with for five years, Randy: Okay.

*Daron:* and um, now she cuts out newspaper articles of people that are illiterate that are doctors and that are, you know, have Ph.D.s and all this stuff, showing me how they function.

Randy: Right. (Daron 1.18)

Daron says that, at one time, he had no knowledge of the word *literacy*, much less an understanding of it. His experience with County Literacy makes him aware of the term, perhaps when he first encounters it in the organization's name. He introduces the term *illiterate* but with a sense of fascination, and he explains how his tutor, a sponsor, helped him to understand how people function, introducing the concept of functional literacy to me.

Daron's discussion of literacy moves from thinking only about his own experiences to generalizing about the experiences of other learners. He has moved from a place of being unfamiliar with the term *literacy* to being able to comment of the lives of learners:

*Daron:* So literacy, I know exactly what it means now. Absolutely. There is um, doctors that actually function and have their Ph.D.s and all their stuff

Randy: And yet,

*Daron:* that don't read and write that well. So it's, it's just amazing and I have learned that every individual that has a problem with literacy, basically works out their own technique how to survive in life *Randy:* Uh-hmm.

*Daron:* with their problem. They have a different technique, helped to work their own problem. Do their own reading, their own, I don't know if you've heard that yet.

*Randy:* Um, well you just shared some of the ways that you went through, by having other people do,

Daron: Yes.

Randy: things like

*Daron:* Exactly. But once you get into learning, a technique that may work for me may not work for another illiterate person

Randy: Right.

*Daron:* is the thing. They may come up with their own little technique that's going to help them. (Daron 1.18)

The term *literacy* makes him think of all the people who have functioned, survived, and succeeded in this world but "don't read and write well." He uses the word "problem," even though my question did not directly suggest discussing difficulties. Daron describes coping strategies and techniques that compensate for a lack of facility with literacy and wonders if I am aware of this phenomenon. He treats me like a fellow sponsor, perhaps a novice, but someone who can understand what he is explaining.

Not only is Daron able to share his understanding of literacy, but he is able to distinguish between ways of thinking about it. When discussing his own coping technique, Daron says, "Now I can go to the doctor's office and um I'd always called it cheating, you know, writing down stuff you need? But Brian calls it uh preparing yourself, so actually, he's right. It's actually preparing yourself" (Daron 1.15). In his follow-up interview, Daron makes a similar statement: "County Literacy calls it preparing yourself, and I called it cheating all these years" (Daron 2.9). He differentiates between his old and new understandings of coping strategies. He credits Brian and County Literacy with his positive re-orientation, although he is still aware of his former pejorative description of cheating.

Daron tells his own story of his journey toward success during which he develops his literacy meta-discourse. He remembers a time when the word *literacy* was unfamiliar to him and now feels very confident in his understanding of it. Daron has used selective

negative understandings to motivate him, believe that he can be as successful as movie stars, doctors, and the richest people in the world. Along the way, he has learned that his experiences are similar to many and he has discovered new ways to talk about his literacy. While not every learner has the same literacy meta-discourse as Daron, his narrative is evidence of the ways learners reflect upon and analyze their literacy and use this capital to inform their literacy investment.

#### **Mutual Influences on Literacy Meta-Discourse**

While this study shows that learners and sponsors tend to inhabit separate discourse communities, several moments in interviews show the ways that sponsors and learners can affect each other's literacy meta-discourse. During interaction and dialogue, they shape each other's understandings of literacy. In these instances, the sponsor or learner is more assertive, pressuring the other to change, but the interchanges hint at the potential for co-constructed understandings of literacy.

Some sponsors recognize that they deliberately affect the ways that learners think about literacy. Sharice, an instructor, explains the distinction between being able to pronounce words and comprehension:

*Sharice:* It's really key, but it's hard for the students to accept that. And they'll say, I can read. But they don't understand. Yes, we know you can read the words (*laughs*) but you don't understand what they're saying. So that's a different, difficult concept too, I think, to give some adult learners. *Randy:* Right.

*Sharice:* Because in school, they've just been taught reading just means can you read this out loud. And so this is so different than the traditional kind of schooling that they've had in the past. We're emphasizing different things for them and it's kind of changing their way of thinking, I think

Randy: Uh-hmm.

Sharice: about learning. Um, so.

*Randy:* So that difference between comprehension and word call. *Sharice:* Yes.

#### Randy: Yeah.

Sharice: Yeah, yes. Exactly. (Shirley 1.10)

Sharice suggests that learners struggle with the distinction between word calling and comprehension. She feels that high schools enforce that reading is decoding or word call, but she wants them to move to a new understanding of reading as comprehension. Focusing on comprehension was "kind of changing their way of thinking." She felt that this was an important understanding for her students to possess.

Learners confirm that sponsors have a powerful influence on their literacy metadiscourse. Learners change the ways they think about themselves and what they consider to be literacy. Daron says that his tutor provides newspaper stories of people who are considered illiterate but who have become famous or financially successful. He finds them inspirational and uses these accounts to shape the way he thinks about literacy and the place of reading and writing in his own life. Jennifer's tutor gets her to read different materials, and so Jennifer expands her ideas about reading. She says, "I had a problem reading chapter books. Never read a chapter book 'til I got with this tutor and I'm just, I'm on my second chapter book, but she give me good books to read, to, so I can get the understanding about it" (Jennifer 1.8). Jennifer celebrates her success and feels less threatened by this kind of reading, crediting her tutor for this change. Thaddeus has a similar claim, telling how he has new options for reading material: "We read like different books, like we read Little King Arthur, Little Blues, like a little, music book that we just finished and I, I really my first, I took my first novel out of the library like last week. . . It was, it's a short novel but it's, it's my first one, so" (Thaddeus1 8). In these cases, the learners respond positively to the nudging of sponsors.

In rarer moments, learners have the power to shape sponsor understandings. They can resist the kinds of literacy work that tutors or instructors set for them. For example, when asked about the part writing plays in literacy, Amanda<sup>80</sup> responds,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>80</sup> Amanda is a Caucasian female in her 60s and is a retired nurse who has been with the program for about five years. She heard about the program, attended the orientation, and then completed tutor training just prior to retirement. The program has paired Amanda with four learners since then, and at the time of her interview, she was just beginning with a new learner. Her learners have had a range of challenges, and the longest tutoring relationship lasted a year and a half, while she never met her second learner.

I think that it is a part of it, but um, I, the, the learners that I have had that I've had an opportunity to try to write with the, that would be the, actually all, well not, it's two of them, actually I, the first one we didn't have an opportunity, but the second two um, writing was not something that they wanted to do, that they felt very comfortable with doing um, and, and um, to an extent balked at doing it so they never did very much of it. (Amanda 1.14)

She had not included writing as part of her understanding of literacy in her tutoring context because her learners were not requesting help with their writing. Two learners did not want to work on writing and actively resisted, so she did not work with them on writing. This does not mean that her understanding of literacy was changed permanently, but she adapted to her learners' goals. It also does not suggest that Amanda sought to change other sponsors.

Learners can also inspire sponsors to reconsider their understandings of literacy through interaction. Rosa, a tutor of only two months when we interviewed, challenges her previous understanding that literacy was limited to the practices of reading and writing. She says, "So literacy is not just reading any more or being able to write a sentence like I thought it was and maybe like getting by. It's experiences too" (Rosa 1.9). She discusses how she had worked on some reading activity and discovered that her learner did not know that the Sears Tower is in Chicago: "She didn't know things about Chicago. And that to me is one of the beautiful things in life. Like learning about new places or going to new places, and I think about how she's missing on exciting new things because she hasn't been able to read about them" (Rosa 1.9). Rosa was shocked, not just by the things her learner did not know, but by her old understanding of literacy. She realizes that literacy is more than being able to access reading materials and now feels that the knowledge that one gains from reading is also a part of literacy. This resembles cultural literacy as described by Hirsch (1988), like knowing the locations of famous monuments. Rosa revises her understanding of literacy based on what she observes in her learner.

Sometimes a change in the way one perceives literacy is sparked by a simple question. For example, when asked her thoughts about literacy, Violet<sup>81</sup> explains,

*Violet:* I think ability to read. It would be what, what comes to my mind. *Randy:* Um, does the, the idea of writing fit into that at all? Or is that secondary?

*Violet:* Hm. That's a good question. Um, I don't think of that right away, but certainly within the training we received at County Literacy *Randy:* Uh-hmm.

*Violet:* that's a big component of what we have to do. Um, so yeah, I have to kind of add that into my,

Randy: Right.

*Violet:* to my scope of services. (Violet 1.10)

Although I am not a learner, I am able to influence Violet's thought on literacy. Violet's first association is with reading, and she is a bit surprised when I ask about writing, both by the question and by her recognition that she has excluded writing when the program does not. The mandatory 15-week training course emphasizes writing and the need to do reading and writing every tutoring session. While she had ignored the place of writing, she does not indicate any hesitation over her ability to both incorporate writing into her tutoring sessions or her understanding of literacy.

While examples of mutual influence are not bountiful they do exist and reveal the ways in which dialogue and interaction can lead to new ways of thinking about literacy. Sponsors and learners can apply direct pressure on each other, resulting in a fresh look at literacy that affects behavior. Communication followed by reflection can lead people to reconsider the ways they have thought about literacy and result in new concepts. A simple question can also be the catalyst for reflection and analysis. What is remarkable about each of the meta-moments is that the push toward reflection that results in greater

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>81</sup> Violet is a 54-year old Caucasian female. She is a college graduate who owns her own commercial interiors firm. Violet has worked in literacy education for the last five years and was part of a now defunct literacy initiative sponsored by Regional Community College. After that program ended, Violet was searching a volunteer website and came across a link for County Literacy. Violet volunteers because she believes that everyone can learn and that it is "everyone's responsibility to make the world a better place in any way that they can" (Violet 1.4). Her first tutoring experience caused her to panic when she realized how much her learner struggled with reading. At the time of the interview, she had been assigned a new learner but had not met him.

awareness or a new understanding about literacy need not be confrontational. Literacy meta-discourse can be nurtured in the most subtle and gentle of ways.

# Conclusion

Learners, quite remarkably, develop their literacy meta-discourse, seemingly against all odds. They often wrestle with literacy from an early age, not immersed in the primary discourse of literacy in their homes but having to find support in other institutions. These institutions, such as schools, however, are often places of difficult experiences where learners endure without developing the literacy they need. Sometimes they leave but still suffer without the high school diplomas that would give them access to employment and further education. Even with very little help from home and school, and sometimes with active resistance from both, adult learners have been able to learn about literacy and the way it works. They use this meta-knowledge to inform their investment decisions, helping them to establish goals and determine when they have achieved those goals.

This is not to suggest that all learners have fully developed their literacy metadiscourse with no room for growth. Learners take up literacy meta-discourse in various ways and demonstrate various levels of proficiency. Some wrestle with the term *literacy*, and others find ways to appropriate limited understandings. Still others have complex engagement with literacy that allows them to see the way that it works in their lives and in the world. Unfortunately, sponsors often do not recognize this ability in learners and do not consciously provide opportunities to help learners reflect upon and analyze their own literacy pursuits. My research, however, shows that, not only do learners operate with critical meta-discourse, but learners and sponsors can benefit from mutual influence. This suggests that creating and promoting more opportunities for dialogue about literacy would profit both groups.

## Chapter 7

## **Implications and Directions for Future Research**

# Introduction

My research began with an investigation of the concerns relating to participation in adult literacy programming, specifically examining why about half of the adults who begin programs leave before sponsors feel they should. I hypothesized that the ways that adults understand literacy and the expectations they have of literacy influence their participation in adult literacy programs. I suspected that, if I talked with adult learners, they would have a different version from sponsors to explain their participation patterns. This was not to suggest that sponsors were being dishonest but that perspective matters. Working with two adult literacy sites, I focused on what I could learn from and about learners through interviews, observation, an ethnographic case study with an adult learner, and sponsor-generated artifacts. I sought information from adult learners concerning their understandings of literacy, their motivations for participation, and their expectations and goals relating to continued participation and completion. I also solicited sponsors' impressions of learners, based on their interactions, in order to better understand learner participation, but I placed sponsors in a position of secondary importance. My aim and hope were to expand knowledge and visibility of the lives of adult literacy learners so that sponsors would take careful notice of learners' decisionmaking processes in relation to participation.

The learners in this study have complex understandings of literacy and make sophisticated choices in their pursuit of literacy learning that are not represented in most adult literacy research. While much fruitful data has been created from quantitative studies such as the National Literacy Surveys (NALS) and research done using those surveys, qualitative data on participation, the kinds that provides rich descriptions of learners, are sparse. Quantitative data, often associated with the terms *attrition* and *retention*, represent participation from the perspective of sponsors, linking learner

behaviors with sponsor concerns and outcomes, such as budgets, unemployment, and social welfare dependence. In my study, however, I did not want to learn about program attrition and retention; rather, I wanted to learn about why adult learners decide to join, stay, and leave. In short, what do learners have to say about their own participation?

In this final chapter, I consider the implications of the main findings of my research for learners and sponsors before considering directions for future research. This study reveals that the economic metaphors that have dominated research and discussions of literacy have masked the thoughtful, creative decision-making identities of learners. My work also documents learners' literacy meta-discourse that sponsors fail to recognize. These insights suggest a need for a new perspective of adult literacy learning, specific attention to learners' social capital, and increased dialogue between learners and sponsors on the meaning of literacy, creating a new relationship between the two groups. Finally, I consider my research process and offer guidance for future researchers, including all of us in the field, who will continue to seek out ways to amplify the voices of adult learners.

# A New Perspective on an Old Metaphor: What Could that Mean?

In developing and overseeing the work of adult literacy, sponsors have represented learners in oversimplified and unflattering ways. Conceptual metaphors that equate literacy/ illiteracy with health/sickness or peace/war surface periodically, but the representation of literacy as a problem or crisis has remained constant, probably because this view is foundational in the genesis of adult literacy initiatives and programming. Sponsors see themselves as the problem solvers, and they remain dominant, powerful, and heroic in whatever metaphor or model they choose for themselves.

Using sponsor-biased metaphors can reinforce the idea that sponsors do not have to consult and work with adult learners in democratic and equitable ways. If the problem is illiteracy, and adult learners are illiterate, then learners are part of the problem. Learners become the thing that sponsors act upon, rather than actors. Even the economic metaphors, so popular with the federal government in its approach to adult literacy, suggest that sponsors are active investors, while learners are investments that sponsors put money into in the hopes of solid returns like increased employment. But what would happen if the perspective of this economic metaphor were shifted?

I argue that learners are not passive recipients but active investors in their literacy learning. Learners assess and commit to literacy goals with the resources, risks, and sacrifices necessary to achieve them. They may not consciously describe their behavior in economic terms, but their words and actions show that they make deliberate choices based on what they feel are the positive potentials for their interaction with and commitment to literacy programs. They treat sponsors as brokers whom they commission and trust to put their time, energy, finances, and efforts to profitable use. When learners see significant returns on their investments, they gain confidence and invest more. Their participation remains stable. When they believe that their investment is not providing returns or that continued investment in literacy jeopardizes their investment in home or work or family, then they re-evaluate their participation.

Learner literacy investment is a critically important alternate perspective to sponsorship. Sponsorship describes the ways that those who possess literacy offer it to those that do not have it with expectations of compensation (Brandt, 2001). Learner literacy investment focuses on the ways that those in pursuit of literacy provide personal resources to those who are literate with the expectation of improving their literate capital. The difference, however, is significant for the ways that the metaphor of learner literacy investment disrupts and challenges so much of sponsor-oriented approaches to adult learners and literacy programs.

First, if the dominant metaphor were learner literacy investment, then the current sponsor discourse, including the terms *attrition* and *retention*, would have to change. I have struggled in this study not to use the terms, except when directly referencing sponsors' use, and instead use terms that reflect a learner's vantage point like *leave* and *stay*, which are descriptive and viable alternatives. *Attrition* and *retention* can only work in a sponsor-centered world where the onus is on policy-makers, administrators, instructors, counselors, and tutors to make learners join, to ensure that they stay, and to guarantee that they learn to read and write. These terms suggest that sponsors have the exclusive responsibility (or burden) to figure out learners' needs and expectations and to meet them.

Sponsors need to take stock of their own discourse. *Retention* and *attrition* have alternatives that reflect learner perspectives and work well. I am reminded of my time at

the Summer School for literacy professionals and researchers entitled "Linking Learning to Literacies: A Social Practice View," sponsored by Lancaster Literacy Research Centre of the University of Lancaster, England. In July 2009, I attended a week-long training program and conference, and during one of the sessions, I used the term *attrition*, only to be met with blank stares. After a quick informal survey, I discovered that only one of the twenty people in the room, who happened to be American, was familiar with the term in reference to adult literacy. All others relied on the term *persistence*, describing learners as more or less persistent. Clearly, it is possible to function with alternate language. The alternate terminology should model the perspective of learners, but not all of the terms that learners use may be equally useful. For example, learners use terms that may have unintended negative consequences, such as *quit* or *drop out*, but using terms like *leave* and *stay*, which are also part of their discourse, might lead to altered perspectives on participation.

Second, using a learner literacy investment metaphor suggests a more cooperative model, one in which learners with some resources commission brokers with other resources to work with them to produce returns that benefit both. Brokers also enjoy payment when an investment succeeds, and likewise they suffer when investments fail. Sponsors must behave differently if they see themselves as brokers rather than investors. They should approach adult literacy as a partnering opportunity, one in which they can work with rather than on learners to improve their literacies. Mission statements, promotional literature, instructional training, and program rhetoric in general should reflect a learner-centered perspective.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Lev Vygotsky all helped to push for child/student–centered learning in which the needs of the learner were more important than the needs of educational sponsors, but this concept does not seem to have permeated adult literacy education. In particular, the legislation seems focused on sponsors' needs relating to employment and the economy. If the federal government were to treat as central the learners' perspective, then the ways that literacy programs are structured and funded would have to change, as would the ways they are assessed. This seems like a distant, long-term goal, so perhaps, it is more useful to think about a bottomup pattern of influence, with individual programs altering their language and pedagogical

approaches and having change move up the hierarchical chain to more powerful sponsors.

## **Reconsidering Triggering Events**

My study shows that literacy investment is no simple process, especially in relation to learners' decisions to join literacy programs. What motivates adult learners to invest in ABE and GED programs is a complex network of positive and negative forces, both internal and external, that is difficult to predict, and it becomes visible only through sustained conversation and exploration with adult learners. Past research and current practice, however, have often relied on the assumption that adult learners participate in programs based on singular triggering events, and that sponsors can create and sustain learner motivation by targeting these events. This assumption has clouded the ways that sponsors perceive learner participation.

The data from this study challenges this assumption and approach to adult literacy. Learners in both the one-on-one tutoring and GED programs have complex motivations for making their initial investment. Their decisions are not limited to obvious triggering events. Sometimes learners lost jobs prior to registering for the program, but the chronology of events did not necessarily mean that one event caused the other. One failed investment did not demand that they pursue another investment straight away. Learners reflected on combinations of internal and external motivations, both positive and negative. They joined because they felt they deserved to be literate but also because they felt ashamed to be illiterate. They came for the sake of their children and for the sake of their own self esteem. Learners joined when they had jobs, lost their jobs, knew that they would be losing their jobs, and were trying to ward off losing their jobs. Some wanted admission to college while others needed support after getting into college.

Sponsors need to devote greater attention and dialogue to the multiple and complex motivations learners have for joining and staying in programs, their investment reasoning. Too many assumptions and presumptions inform program design, suggesting reasons for learners to participate that only partially address their needs and desires. While the substantial needs for employment and education must not be neglected, other factors relating to self esteem, family, and social identities must not be ignored. Programs

need to spend more time interviewing adults at intake, not simply to discover basic demographic information, but to uncover as much motivational data as possible. Adult learners and sponsors need to continue to have regular conversations about their goals throughout their participation. Research has already shown that attention, even a single phone call, during the first three weeks of a learner's participation in a program increases the likelihood of persistence (Quigley, 1998). It stands to reason that frequent interaction, along with instruction and learning, will encourage continued participation.

Designer tutoring is a useful pedagogical approach that can address the multiple and multi-layered needs and motivations of learners. Designing instruction to meet the articulated goals of the learners is the method used by County Literacy in its one-one-one tutoring program. In-take coordinators begin discussing with learners their goals in an initial interview, and tutors continue discussing and documenting learners' goals, progress, and revised goals, responding to the life changes in learners' lives. Designer tutoring encourages learners to persist because, if their learning needs change, the program changes to accommodate them, rather than sending learners away to find a program that does suit them. Of course, no program can be all things to all learners. If a program does not offer GED classes and that is what some learners desire, they may not be able to suddenly create a GED program. However, sponsors could liaise with a GED program and continue to offer tutoring for learners.

I realize that my suggestions focus primarily on actions that sponsors can take, and that sponsors have limitations. For example, an instructor at Regional can have 40 students in a single GED class, and expecting one person to monitor, counsel, and teach each learner may be logistically impossible. The responsibility for attending to learners' goals, however, can be shared by the counselors within the program and possible mentors drawn from the group so that learners help each other articulate and monitor their goals. Sponsors must resist the tendency to underestimate the complexity of learners' motivations as well as their abilities to take control of their literacy investment and even support the investment of other learners.

#### The Affordances and Limitations of Social Capital

My research confirms that learners can and do rely on the support of other learners and people in their social networks. Both groups used their social capital, consulting their networks of friends, family members, social workers, and neighbors to discover their programs and navigate the systems in order to join. While learners should be acknowledged for their ability to use limited resources, I do not want to exaggerate their wealth. They have social networks, but the members of those networks might also have limited resources. Without the more literate practices of research using the Internet, newspapers, social services, libraries, and so on, they remain limited. It all depends on their social network, who they know and what those people know.

The learners in my study all relied heavily on their social capital, using a referral system of some sort, a networking of individuals who provided information and motivation to join. Regional Community College was often a motivating force. Those who sought access and failed to get into college level classes were recommended to County Literacy's program. Learners sought out County to improve their literacy skills in order to be able to pass the entrance exams. Some even participated in basic courses at the College while doing one-on-one tutoring to improve their literacy. Others heard about programs through friends who had or were participating in the program. In some cases, students took classes together and shared rides. Others had family members who investigated programs and then recommended them to the learners.

In all of these stories there is no mention of learners going to websites, reading pamphlets, or researching the program first from direct contact with printed materials or even program coordinators and staff. In fact, most of them decided to go to County Literacy and sign up without knowing anyone who had been in the program or doing any independent investigation. They simply took the word of the counselor at Regional. This is not to say that adult learners never seek additional information, but it is telling how people first learn about the program. It speaks to the public relations efforts that are made to reach out to literacy learners. If the information is not disseminated in a model that resembles higher education, then what is the best way to reach learners?

I would argue that positive learner experiences are the most important advertisement for adult literacy programs. Learners talk to each other, except in the

instances when shame leads them to keep their literacy work a secret. But even in these instances, when learners experience success and are satisfied with their investment, they are willing to talk about their programs with others. Sponsors cannot take lightly learners' dissatisfaction with tutors, procedures, communication, or anything else. My research experience has shown me that learners can leave programs, never to be heard from again, but that does not mean that their friends, family members, and neighbors are not listening to any negative criticism that they may have of programs. If learners decide to leave, sponsors can aim to have them leave satisfied with the efforts of the program.

Not only should sponsors aim to cultivate learner satisfaction, but they also should find ways to cultivate learners' social capital, which can be a hit-or-miss resource. A better informed network means that learners are more likely to learn of an adult literacy program. If sponsors help all learners whom they encounter know as much as they can about their programs, then, even if they do not join, they can inform others in their network. Sponsors can continue to cooperate with institutions and agencies that they know many adult learners will encounter. Adult learners are often a part of demographics associated with poverty: immigrants, minorities, women, and the unemployed (Limage, 1990). Workers in agencies that come into contact with these populations should be aware of and knowledgeable about local literacy programs. Local programs should also have an official relationship of referral among themselves, such as County Literacy and Regional Community College do. If learners investigate a program that may not be best for them, they can receive immediate assistance and access to a program better suited to the learners' needs. Finally, while adult learners may not access traditional print information in brochures and websites, other members of their social networks might. Not every member of a learner's network struggles with literacy, and some, like Daron's sister, might be able to access the information and pass it on.

### **Dialogue and Literacy Meta-Discourse**

My research shows that learners and sponsors are aware of, reflect upon, and analyze literacy in various ways. They both have a literacy meta-discourse that continues to develop as they receive new information through dialogue and interactions and then reflect upon the new data. This meta-discourse is capital just as literacy itself is capital. If

adult learners are to be well informed investors in their literacy learning, then it makes sense for them to develop a sophisticated literacy meta-discourse. The better they understand literacy, the more sound their investment decisions and participation will be.

Sponsors concentrate on developing learners' literacies, but the data suggest they seldom engage learners in meta-discourse about their literacy, possibly because they have assumed that learners cannot handle critical reflection or are not interested in it. The interviews, however, show that sponsors' assumptions about learners' ability to talk about literacy are not accurate. Sponsors at both sites assume that learners have a complete lack of familiarity with and appreciation for the concept of literacy. They clearly state in the interviews that they have not heard learners use the term *literacy*, and they doubt that learners are able to bring thoughts about literacy to bear on their participation and goals. They also suggest that a lack of understanding impedes learners' progress in their pursuit of literacy.

Learner interviews, however, contradict sponsor's beliefs. While a few learners avoid the term *literacy* during the interviews, all others attempt to define it and are able to have sustained conversation with me about their own literacy as well as the value of literacy in general. They draw on understandings from their experiences, and some of them have more varied and sophisticated ideas, but almost all of them are able to contemplate and discuss literacy, sometimes coming to new understandings in their interviews.

This is not to suggest that sponsors' impressions about the reticence of learners to discuss literacy are unfounded. It may be accurate that they have never heard learners use the term *literacy*; however, their inferences that they have no concept of literacy are wrong. Learners' lack of discussion with sponsors is probably related to instructors and tutors not addressing literacy directly. Sponsors attribute learner silence to ignorance of the term or to myopic focus on particular outcomes, like passing the GED tests. I have evidence to the contrary. Learners might not feel confident initiating a conversation, but they appear willing to engage, sometimes very briefly, with discussions of literacy when I broached the topic both directly and indirectly. A few learners, such as Daron, Colyn, and Shania, speak at length about literacy. When sponsors and learners do not raise the topic of literacy, learners do not gain exposure to sponsor discourse.

Sponsor disengagement with learners' literacy meta-discourse has a number of significant consequences. If sponsors do not help learners to develop their meta-knowledge through dialogue, then learners have restricted resources of information. I have shown that learners in my study did not consult websites, brochures, or other kinds of sponsor-generated materials when considering joining their programs, so it stands to reason that they are not gaining useful information about literacy from these published materials. They rely on human contact for information, and sponsors are rich resources for learners, but only if they have access to their knowledge. Sponsors should seek to dialogue with learners about literacy, both in deliberate curricular instruction and in teachable moments. Learners will become more comfortable as they talk and less resistant to sponsors' efforts to enhance their literacy meta-discourse.

My research already shows that learners and sponsors can and do engage in mutual exchange of ideas around literacy, shaping each other's understandings of literacy. Sponsors learn about literacy from learners, having their ideas challenged by questions and resistance. Learners learn about literacy when sponsors introduce new reading materials and talk with them about the ways that other people have wrestled with literacy. At the moment, however, this mutual exchange appears accidental rather than planned. I feel that reflective and analytic engagement around literacy must be intentional if learners are to gain capital more quickly and efficiently. Similar moves have occurred in the field of composition studies in which learners have been invited by instructors to not only learn how to write for academic audiences but to reflect upon their writing practices and experiences (Yancey, 1998).

Introducing critical dialogue does not require dramatic changes to policy or a rewriting of current adult education acts. Sponsors and learners can engage in small moments and spaces. For example, Kathleen points out that she introduces unfamiliar vocabulary regularly to learners; sponsors could do the same with the term *literacy*. A GED classroom or a tutoring session, as well as orientations and intake interviews, are ideal spaces for cultivating a critical discourse.

But what is the goal of literacy-meta-discourse dialogue? One possible direction is to agree upon a particular understanding or definition of literacy. Some may believe that, if all parties had the same definition to work with, there would be less variation and

misunderstanding. Shared meaning would bridge communities. This reasoning strikes me as flawed. First of all, who decides the single definition? Definitions are connected with power, and giving the task of defining to sponsors or adult learners produces an imbalance in power that might lead to abuse of the less powerful. Secondly, even if a full consensus of all sponsors and adult learners could be drafted, such an exercise might create a useful starting point but be an impossible tool in adult literacy education. Literacy will continue to mean many things to many people, and any artificially fixed definition would be more of a reference point (perhaps memorial monument) of what literacy meant at a particular moment, probably only in the room where it was written. Finally, if the definition were limited to a particular nation, culture, or community, having the present group of sponsors and adult learners agree on a meaning would not ensure that literacy would mean the same thing for others in the near or distant future. As Roberts (1995) puts it, "if the aim is to find a single, universally applicable, accepted-byall, definition of 'literacy,' the quest is doomed to failure" (p. 428). Attempting to tame literacy's dynamic nature is a futile exercise.

Instead, learners and sponsors should have dialogic experiences that embrace contradictions and ambiguity, not to frustrate learners, but to foster critical thinking about literacy. Sponsors wrestle with the meaning of literacy so why shouldn't learners and with the benefit of the guidance and experience of sponsors? Avoiding discussions of literacy does not spare learners unpleasantness or frustration. Learners stand to gain greater competence and confidence through conversations about literacy with sponsors. To suggest that learners cannot handle complex conversations is insulting to learners, contradictory to their lived experiences, and disproven by the transcribed interviews of this study.

Developing literacy meta-discourse also means using difficult terminology. Some might interpret the discomfort that some learners had with the term *literacy* as evidence for using alternate terminology. I disagree with this interpretation for a number of reasons. First, not all learners were uncomfortable with the term, and many became more confident as they contemplated its meaning aloud. Second, not using the term denies learners access to its power. The word *literacy* is rife throughout research and sponsor-generated materials, and to not engage learners is to suggest that they cannot access or

should not have access to these resources. Finally, exposure to the term brings fuller understanding of it. Daron stated that five years ago he was unfamiliar with the meaning of literacy, but in his interviews he offers sophisticated commentary and analysis of literacy, and he mentions the direct intervention of his tutor in helping him to understand the way literacy works in the world.

One of the most powerful illustrations of the possibilities of learner dialogic engagement with sponsors comes from my attendance at the Adult Education and Research Conference (AERC) in June 2010. One basic skills program invited five of its learners to attend and present at the conference. While my experience with adult literacy conferences has been limited, I have never attended a session that involved adult learners in the discussion of the meaning of literacy and the instructional methods used for them. Stan Goto from Western Washington University and Marcia Leister from Bellingham Technical College (BTC) presented "Critical Conversations: Basic Skills Students at the Table" along with five students from the "Voices of Success" Program in Basic Academic Skills at BTC.<sup>82</sup> The program aims to create dialogic rather than monologic discourse, regularly involving and consulting students in the development of the program. The sponsors believe, "A seismic shift occurs when educators stop talking at students and they begin talking with students. Everyone is put in a potentially vulnerable place; everyone becomes a learner. When knowledge is truly co-constructed, the ultimate outcome cannot be predicted with certainty. This can be disconcerting, but it can also be liberating" (Goto & Leister, p. 155).

What I found most fascinating was the portion of the presentation when the five adult learners critiqued the sessions that they had attended the day before. Though nervous, the learners competently performed before approximately 25 practitioners and researchers who had dozens of publications among them before moving on to lead some of the discussion groups. Adult learners and sponsors dialogued about the meaning of literacy, actively learning from each other. It was a rare moment that ended too quickly, but demonstrated that sponsor-learner interactions are possible in any adult literacy program.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>82</sup> http://www.btc.ctc.edu/BasicAcademic/index.asp

### **A New Relationship**

Cultivating critical conversations about literacy has the power to challenge the underestimation of adult learners' abilities and disrupt potential infantilization of adult learners. Some may have a hard time seeing adult learners as savvy investors because they conflate adult literacy education with compulsory education, equating adult learners with children in the first years of schooling, when reading and writing are targeted. Children are denied access to many things in educational planning and implementation because of their lack of knowledge, experience, physical development, and mental maturity. Adult learners may have limitations, but maturity enables them to bring so much that is useful to understanding literacy. What is fundamentally different is that adults are being taught by adults. This provides an opportunity for interdependence that is not possible with children. Sponsors do not need to talk down to adult learners, avoid what they perceive to be difficult concepts, or translate ideas into learner discourse; rather, they should communicate with adults as adults.

Some may wonder if adult learners can cope with literacy meta-discourse, but learners are already engaged in complex decision-making and interactions in their lives. Adults juggle hobbies and interests, as well as home, work, and community responsibilities in sophisticated and complex ways that children do not. However, adult learners often do not receive credit for being intelligent decision-makers, capable of using critical discourse with sponsors. For example, Grabill (2001) points out that, while the program he studied used the Adult Learning Plan (ALP), an instrument for helping learners and tutors establish the goals of adult learners, the "ALP itself was developed by a committee that included teachers, intake coordinators, program directors, state staff, but no students" (p. 55). In this way, adult learners are positioned as children, that is, they are treated as if the meanings of literacy and the ways it is experienced are not up to them. This is not the case in other spheres. For example, adult health care looks different from child health care because adults, unlike children who use health care, have a choice in constructing packages, choosing physicians, accepting or rejecting treatment, and so forth. In a sense, they define what health care is for them individually and within their

communities, with cooperation from medical sponsors. The choices are not limitless, but adults have real agency in constructing choices.

A new kind of relationship between sponsors and learners would be possible if they dialogue and collaborate as partners in literacy. Sponsors would not underestimate the complexity of learners' lives and thinking, and learners would not regularly silence themselves and defer to sponsors' authority. Sponsors would not have to leave learners out of the discussions about their own literacy, and they would not have to guess at or assume what they understand and need. At the same time, learners would not need to move to a "literacy comes second" model (Rogers, 2000), where their agency is acknowledged but their potentially limited experiences and vision are not. Both groups would learn from and with each other, co-constructing their understandings of literacy and the best ways to achieve both sets of literacy goals. If this were to happen, the term *literacy partners* would need to replace the terms *learners* and *sponsors*.

### **Challenges in the Research Process**

My research on adult learners and their literacy has been a frustrating and enlightening project and process. Throughout the construction and implementation of the investigation I have learned as much about why this kind of research is difficult and rare as about the central question of my research. This unexpected information is useful for my own future research as well as for those who wish to pursue studies like mine that involve face-to-face interactions with adult literacy learners.

One of the challenges I had not considered thoroughly was that, when adult learners speak freely, they often share difficult and painful experiences. The human element of face-to-face interactions is something not accounted for in quantitative approaches to data collection that often provide distance for the researcher. For example, surveys can be administered via mail and email, or with a proxy moderator. While some might assume this distance offers objectivity and a better model for data collection, it ignores the real struggles that adult learners have in thinking about difficult experiences or finding ways to express themselves. For instance, Trisha often cried while discussing her life, the in-the-moment rawness so overwhelming that words could not fully express the tension and frustration she had with learning and accessing learning. Such

complications are rarely, if ever, reflected in surveys. Some learners signaled difficult experiences that they did not want to discuss by glossing over details with labels like "trouble" and "family problems." Sometimes, however, after a few moments of conversation, they unpacked their words and gave more revealing stories and motivations, telling of abuse, an unsupportive spouse, or a criminal past. Related to this is the strain and drain on the researcher who must decide whether or not to push through the tears, stop the interview, or change the subject. Care for the person, I think, must always win out.

Another challenge was that gaining access to adult learners was far more difficult than I had planned for or imagined. I had assumed that all interviews and follow-up interviews could be completed in a matter of three months through efficient scheduling and dogged determination. I was basing my plan on the lives of traditional college students and on my ability to access people regularly through technology. Most adult learners in these programs, however, have lives very different from traditional college students.<sup>83</sup> To offer 30 minutes for an interview might mean sacrificing time with children, the ability to run an errand, or just a bit of rest after working full time and attending a class or tutoring session. Additionally, the adult learners I worked with had different relationships with technology. Many did not have email addresses, and some who did were not regular users. Most did not own computers and depended on technology in public libraries. Cell phones were generally reliable, but in at least five cases, numbers were changed or disconnected between the times that I received a contact and attempted the call. The collection of data can be as unpredictable and frenetic as the lives of those I interviewed.

Getting access to learners is a tricky negotiation and masks some of the decisionmaking processes made by sponsors. As a researcher who was not officially employed within either program, I relied on the efforts of sponsors in providing access to adult learners and students. Sponsors were helpful, but I had little control over when and how they would produce the names, and I struggled to reach a total 18 adult learners. Collecting information without involving adult learners (relying on reports, for example)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>83</sup> I define traditional university students as between their late teens and early 20s, entering immediately after graduation, primarily unmarried, non-parents, and without full-time employment.

would have been far more efficient, but I would have told a familiar story from sponsor perspectives that would offer no new insight to issues surrounding participation.

I learned that relationships provide results. Sponsors do not grant access and learners do not agree to interviews based on pure altruism. Meeting and talking with tutors/instructors and other sponsors were always associated with increased numbers of potential interviews. Attending a tutor social yielded two adult learners when the pool had run dry. I conducted interviews at a classroom site where one of the cooperating instructors held her classes, and she provided more solid student contacts than all other cooperating instructors and sponsors. I do not think this was a coincidence. Agreeing to present some of my research findings on County Literacy helped move along a late request for more interviews. While I was trying not to infiltrate sites and ingratiate myself, I discovered that this kind of research benefits from face-to-face interactions.

Using sponsors affected the participant population I worked with and ultimately influenced the kind of data that I was able to collect. Sponsors at both sites required that I get the names and contact information through them. Although I did get to voice my wishes for variety in the sampling, not just a collection of the stellar learners and success stories, I believe some of the learners suggested by sponsors were their more successful participants. I also know from speaking to some of the tutors who were asked to approach their learners that many chose not to approach their learners because they felt they would not be good for my study. "X does not know what he wants" one tutor told me, and so she decided he would be a poor interview. On the other hand, when one instructor deliberately selected two struggling students for me to interview, neither attended interviews and one dropped out of the program. The sample one uses is composed of those willing to show up and willing to talk, and I suspect that these are often some of the most highly motivated members of the group.

Even if the participants were examples of more successful learners, they still faced challenges that influenced my ability to collect data and perform member checking. I did have difficulty contacting many of the people recommended by sponsors, but even after conducting a first interview with learners, I still had difficulty maintaining contact with them. I was only able to conduct follow-up interviews with half of the learners for a number of reasons. Phone numbers I had used just a couple of months before were often

disconnected. I left multiple voice messages on active numbers, but I did not receive returned calls. I scheduled and re-scheduled interviews to compensate difficulties with learner's work schedules, transportation, and child care, and still learners continued to cancel follow-ups. I shifted to texting and had greater success, but some learners stopped responding to my texts. Some learners promised to call back when they were available, but only Jennifer returned my call for a follow-up interview after I left a message. Successful follow-up interviews were often linked with assistance from tutors and instructors.

Member checking was even more difficult, with both sponsors and learners, but this may be related to the length of time that passed since the first interview. Sometimes over a year had passed. Brian and Michelle left County Literacy and Marcy left Regional during my study. Only Brian maintained active email contact, but all other sponsors responded quickly to my member checking efforts. Some learners, like Christie, responded enthusiastically to member checking. Others just could not be reached or found. Many learners did not have viable phone contacts or did not return calls or emails, but I did discover some information through sponsors. For example, Antoinette's tutor informed me that she left the program and the state.

My outsider status as one not obviously connected with the programs (other than as a tutor) had advantages and disadvantages. I think that being an outsider enhanced the credibility of the data collected. I was not an employee of either research site, so I did not represent a direct threat to participants since I had no influence over their participation in the programs, with the exception of my tutor-learner case study. This meant that interviewees could speak freely, knowing that I made no decisions about their participation and that I would provide pseudonyms to protect their identities. My identity as an outsider, however, affected the ways that adult learners responded to my requests for interviews. I had no authority, no real leverage, over their decisions to talk to me. Participants were free to refuse interviews, miss appointments, and leave missed calls and

messages unanswered without any sanctions. Often I had no specific information to explain why interviews did not happen, and I can only speculate as to the reasons.<sup>84</sup>

My outsider identity may also position me in a peculiar way within this research. At times, I pictured myself as a learner, one with little experience in and knowing very little about adult literacy education. I identified with learners who were wrestling with new skills and materials. At other times, I felt like a sponsor, especially when I was invited into spaces where sponsors conversed, such as staff meetings and tutoring workshops. The directors, coordinators, and staff members treated me like one of them. Yet, with the research completed, I feel that I am neither. Perhaps I am in some liminal space, with insight into both worlds but not a permanent part of either. As an academic researcher, I have positions, access, and literacies that align me with sponsors, but as a researcher with a critical educational philosophy that sides with the less powerful, I feel connected with learners. It is possible that my unusual identity is an important one for the kinds of research I wish to carry out, moving among sponsors and learners with an aim to improve the ways they work with each other but never becoming a fixed part of one group.

### **Future Research**

This project began as an exploration of the understandings and expectations that adult learners have of literacy, and now that I am finished, I am certain I have only scratched the surface. I believe that I have offered compelling evidence about the thoughtful ways that adult learners approach literacy and how these enable and constrain their participation in adult literacy programs. But there is more to be done.

It is my intention to add the results of this research to local, national, and global conversations that affect adult literacy policy, programs, and curriculum. I anticipate that this will be a long-term process, in part, because interest in educational issues often can be fickle, that is, today's headline becomes tomorrow's footnote, requiring vigilance to keep attention on and active interest in adult literacy. Additionally, a particular kind of attention, one that shifts the traditional focus, is necessary to make the conversations

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>84</sup> I will consider using a small stipend for any future qualitative research in the hopes of improving sustained contact with learners. Funds are capital and signal a two-way transaction that may be read as a sign of respect for learners' time and knowledge.

more productive. Though much has been done to begin programs, expand outreach, improve instructional methods, and raise public awareness, the numbers of adult learners that leave programs make it clear that more needs to be done and new approaches need to be tried. Much time and energy have been devoted to increasing budgets and attracting greater numbers of participants, but less attention has been given to the knowledge and understanding that adult learners bring with them and how they might be used to enhance the efforts of all stakeholders.

Further research is needed to inform this shift in focus. The ethnographic case study with Trisha is a prime site for my further research. While the momentum of this study led me to moderate the place of our year together in the context of the other 18 learners, I can do much more with the collected materials and data, which includes lessons plans, completed exercises, recorded interviews, transcribed text messages, and a tutoring journal. I would like to closely examine the expectations that Trisha and I had of each other, to see the ways that tutor-learner relationships might affect adult participation. I plan to examine our exchanges more carefully through conversational analysis and critical discourse analysis, two methods not brought to bear in the current study. These analyses might inform ways that both sponsors and learners negotiate their working relationship; in particular, I want to attend to how both parties address and manage difficulties and obstacles.

I was able to collect a variety of sponsor-generated artifacts that I did not get to use substantially in this study. These include emails, reports, newsletters, promotional materials, web pages, and instructional materials that could deepen our understanding of sponsor expectation and definitions of literacy. In particular, I plan to study the ways such materials position learners using positioning theories.

This study also suggests the importance of exploring other sites to see if my conclusions concerning literacy investment and sponsor discourse hold true. I used a one-on-one basic literacy program as well as a GED program at a community college. Studying similar programs as well as pre-GED programs, college preparatory courses, and community literacy programs using similar methods would enrich the perspectives offered here on expectations and understandings of literacy.

I hope that other researchers will take up the challenge of more intimate consideration of adult learners' lives from learners' perspectives. The number of studies that give careful and full attention to adult literacy learners is small (Fingeret & Drennon, 1997; Purcell-Gates, 1995), as is the collection of literacy narratives that might not be considered research but that offer insight into learners' lives (Dawson & Glaubman, 2000; Santiago Baca, 2001). The larger the body of information on adult literacy learners, the greater the influence on the work of sponsors.

I also encourage other adult literacy programs to contribute to our understanding of adult learners through site research. Sponsors already have access to abundant populations of learner participants and the capacity to create longitudinal studies that do not rely only upon the long-term memory of adults to supply details about their understandings and expectations of literacy. While I do recognize the benefit of having researchers not connected with a program do the work, and I also know the financial constraints of already strapped programs that survive on donation and volunteerism, perhaps there are ways for more student researchers to partner with adult literacy programs. Research can also focus on programs, like the one at BTC, that already make moves to develop literacy meta-discourse in learners by inviting them into conversations with sponsors.

The adult learners in this study have taught me a tremendous amount about the value of literacy during my conversations with them. I have heard about and felt their excitement and frustration as they explained their hopes for the future and their concerns about the present. They have shown me that literacy is an investment that is worth sacrifice, risk, energy, and effort. However, to be able to access and use printed material is only a part of its value. The full worth and power of literacy is experienced when literate practices become a part of one's life along with the proficiency to step back and recognize it at work. We who have the power of literacy must make it our goal to cultivate it in the lives of those who are no less deserving.

# Appendices

# Appendix A: Sample Transcription (Page 1)

November 7, 2009, 11:45AM Leonard 1 Begin Transcript

Randy:	<ul> <li>All right, we're here on November 7<sup>th</sup> uh at quarter 'til 12, having an interview with Leonard,<sup>85</sup> whose name I will change. Leonard, can you tell me a little bit about yourself?</li> <li>Yes. My name is Leonard. I like to, my (:19) hobbies like to draw. I'm a family man. I spend time with my family a lot. I like to go places, places that's more healthier for the health, like movies.</li> </ul>	
Leonard:		
Randy:	Okay.	
Leonard:	I like to go to mm, plays. I like to go to let's say parks, something that's really healthy for the health. I like to get out and walk every now and then. And I like to work, but I'm not a street going person.	
Randy:	Okay.	
Leonard:	I mean I don't hang out on the streets with fellas. I don't get involved with partying and, and I'm not into drugs. I don't drink, I don't um, (1:09) stuff I don't do.	
Randy:	Okay. And where are you from?	
Leonard:	I'm from X. I was born in X and I moved to Y because where my wife and family felt like it was closer to the job.	
Randy:	Okay. Um, would you mind sharing your age?	

\_\_\_\_\_

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>85</sup> Leonard is his pseudonym.

Leonard:	I'm 50 years old.	
Randy:	Okay. Um, and I already know that you're a part of the, the County Literacy program. Can you tell me a little bit about what you do and um, how often you meet and those kinds of things?	
Leonard:	I'd be glad to share that with you. Okay I meet once a week in the library, the room that we're in now. I'm learning how to read, and my teacher is C. She's a really outstanding teacher. She's patient. I'm learning how to get my reading together because over the years when I was in my younger days, I was pushed behind school. And I realize reading, learning to read is a big, big thing to do in society because you need it according to life and how to get around. And reading is really nice, something nice to learn to do and it's interesting.	
Randy:	UH-hmm.	

## **Appendix B: Consent Form for Adult Learners**

Study Title: Understandings and Expectations of Literacy in Adult Basic Education

**Researcher:** Randall Pinder, PhD candidate in the Joint Program in English and Education at the University of Michigan

**Purpose:** This study aims to investigate the decision-making processes that inform participation in ABE. Through interviews, interactions, and observations, I hope to offer rich descriptions of motivations for participation, understandings of literacy, and expectations of ABE programs.

**Participation:** Participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for deciding not to participate or withdrawing from the study. To participate in this study, you must offer signed written permission. This study will involve three audio-taped interviews of approximately 30 minutes each that I will transcribe and make available for your review.

**Audio Taping:** In addition to taking notes, I will audiotape each interview I conduct. You will need to consent to the audio recording of the interview. You may ask that the tape recorder be turned off at any time or that particular portions of the interview be erased. Also, you can decide to skip any question that I ask without penalty.

**Confidentiality:** I will use pseudonyms in all data collection and reporting. I will remove all information that might identify you or the program, in order to protect your privacy. Results of this study will be made available to an audience interested in adult education and literacy programming. I will keep all my data in my locked office at UM or in my possession at all times. I will retain the data throughout my career as a researcher. All information will remain confidential except as may be required by federal, state, or local law.

**Benefits and Risks:** This study has the potential to expand the information already collected concerning adult learners' expectations and understandings of literacy. Your responses can provide a fuller picture of factors influencing participation, enabling program development and revision that better suits all stakeholders and possibly improving retention. This is an opportunity to tell your story in your own words.

The risks are minimal. In order to minimize the risks to participants, I will keep all information provided to me in interview confidential, and I will not share those with others in the program. Participants will not be identified in any reports on this study. However, the Institutional Review Board, university, and government officials responsible for monitoring this study may inspect these records. I do not anticipate heightened levels of discomfort created by our interactions, but, if at any time you feel that the interview is too upsetting, I will immediately stop the session and await your decision to continue or cancel the interview.

I will bear all financial costs for this study, and participants will not have any financial responsibility apart from their transportation to and from the interview site. There will be no payment for participation in this study.

**IRB Administration:** Should you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the Institutional Review Board, 540 E. Liberty Street, Suite 202, Ann Arbor, MI 48104-2210, (734) 963-0933, email: irbhsbs@umich.edu.

**Contact information:** Please contact me if you have questions or concerns at any time about this study.

Randall Pinder rapinder@umich.edu 734-883-3298 Anne Curzan, dissertation chair acurzan@umich.edu 734-936-2881

## **Research Agreement for Adult Learners**

I, Randall Pinder, agree to conduct this study according to the principles articulated in the previous pages. Above all, I will respect the wishes and attend to the rights of all study participants as the study progresses.

Signature: \_\_\_\_

Randall Pinder

Date

### Adult Learners Consent: 3 interviews, Fall 2009

Please circle "yes" or "no" after each statement and sign below.

1. I have read and had an opportunity to ask questions about the following consent form.

Yes No

2. I verify that I am 18 years of age or older.

Yes

No

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Printed name: \_\_\_\_\_

3. I agree to allow Randall to audio record and take notes on the individual interviews I am involved in concerning adult literacy. I understand that I may ask for the audio recorder to be turned off at any time or for particular portions of the interview to be erased.

Yes

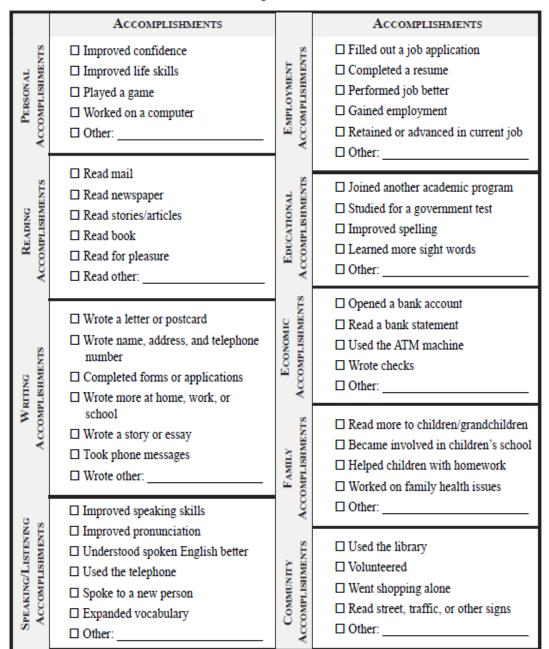
No

Signature:	Date:	

Printed name:

Your participation in this project is voluntary. Even after you sign the informed consent document, you may decide to leave the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you may be otherwise entitled. If you choose to withdraw from the study you may request that the interview transcript and audio recording be stored or destroyed. One copy of this document will be kept together with the research records of this study. Also, you will be given a copy to keep.

# Appendix C: County Literacy Monthly Update Form<sup>86</sup>



Please check the accomplishment(s) you achieved this month. Also fill out the hours section on the back of this form. Your comments and observations are encouraged—Thank You!

\*please let us know if you or your learner have a new address, phone number, or e-mail address.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>86</sup> Name of site and contact information have been removed.

Is there anything else you'd like to share with us about your goals, accomplishments, triumphs, or needs?

Please list any favorite activities you are using in your lessons:

Are there any areas where you could use help?

Dates We Met	Place(s) We Met	Hours Together	Learner Prep Hours	Tutor Prep Hours
	Totals:			

Thank you for filling this out! Your updates will help us improve our programs, seek grants, recognize achievements, and help more learners.

### **Appendix D: Interview Questions for Learners**

- 1. Tell me about your program/ course.
- 2. How did you come to participate in this program? What brought you here?
- 3. What do you think is the most important reason for you being here?
- 4. What did you hear about or read about in this program that made you interested in attending? What do other people say?
- 5. What has your attendance been like?
- 6. What do you say to friends or family who ask why you are in this program?
- 7. What do you hope to gain from this course/ program?
- 8. What has been your experience, if any, with literacy programs before this one? How does this one compare?
- 9. What are your plans once you complete this course?
- 10. What was school like for you?
- 11. What comes to mind when I use the term literacy?
- 12. What are some of the challenges you face in trying to meet your goals?
- 13. What does success in this program mean to you?
- 14. How will you know if you have been successful?

## **Appendix E: Interview Questions for Instructors/Tutors**

- 1. Tell me about your first tutoring/ teaching experience.
- 2. What draws you to this kind of work? What motivates you to participate?
- 3. What do you expect from learners in terms of a) commitment, b) progress, andc) participation?
- 4. What do learners tell you about their reasons for participation?
- 5. What does your learner expect to happen after working with you?
- 6. Tell me about a very positive or negative experience with tutoring/teaching?
- 7. What words come to mind when I say the word *literacy*?
- 8. Do you ask adult learners for their thoughts about literacy or solicit their understandings in any way?
- 9. When learners leave or have irregular attendance, what do you think are the causes?
- 10. How do you plan to meet the individual goals of your learners?

# **Appendix F: Interview Questions for Staff Members**

- 1. What is your definition of literacy?
- 2. Why do you think adults come to this program?
- 3. What are some of your most memorable experiences working with this program?
- 4. What factors do you think encourage adults to stay?
- 5. What factors encourages adults to leave?
- 6. What do you expect from participants in this program?
- 7. What do you wish you knew more about adult learners?
- 8. How would you define success for this program?
- 9. What are some of the important lessons you have learned in your time with this program?
- 10. What would you change to make this a better program?

# **Appendix G: Interview Questions for Administrators**

- 1. What is your definition of literacy?
- 2. Why do you think adult come to this program?
- 3. What factors do you think encourage adults to stay?
- 4. What factors encourages adults to leave?
- 5. What do you expect from participants in this program?
- 6. What do you wish you knew more about adult learners?
- 7. How would you define success for this program?
- 8. What are some of the important lessons you have learned in your time with this program?

#### **Appendix H: My Favorite Things and Dreams by Trisha**

I was born and grew up in Y, then moved out to A. I moved back to Y for  $3\frac{1}{2}$  years. Now I just moved back to A. I have two brothers from my Mom & Dad. I have 4 sisters by my Dad and stepmom that play sports and my Mom and my stepdad never had any more kids. I have 2 kids, a boy 19 and a girl 8. I like to go to the movies, make crafts, and be with my kids. I love to listen to all kinds of music and I love to dance. I would like to move far away from X, have a good job, and be able to have my life back with someone & be with my kids.

My favorite holiday is Thanksgiving. I like to cook and have family around. When I cook for the holiday I like to cook turkey & ham, sweet potatoes, green beans casserole, stuffing and a lot more. My favorite movie is *Twilight* because it keeps you on your toes. My favorite thing I own is a cover. My mom got me this cover that is special to me. It has words on it that are sweet about a daughter and I even sleep with my cover. Here is what my cover says:

### Daughter

A daughter brings sunshine to brighten your days,

A daughter brings joy through her loving ways,

A daughter is a blessing that comes from above,

A special and beautiful treasure to love.

I would like to take a dream vacation to Egypt sometime. I would take a plane and a boat there. And I would take someone that speaks both languages so I can understand where things are and know where to go without getting lost. I would go in the winter or fall. I would stay about a month. I would love to see different things and meet different people.

418 words

### **Bibliography**

Adult Education Act, Pub. L. No. 88-452, (1964).

- American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language. (2006). (4 ed.). Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Anderson-Levitt, K. M. (2006). Ethnography. In J. L. Green, G. Camilli, & P. Elmore (Eds.) Handbook of complementary methods in education research (3rd ed., pp. 279-298). Washington, D.C. and Mahwah, NJ: AERA & Erlbaum.
- Aslanian, C. B. (2004). Adults in higher education today [Electronic Version]. The Scoop, 3.1. Retrieved September 13, 2010 from http://www.steincommunications.com/scoop/vol3\_iss1/adult.html.
- Aslanian, C. B., Brickell, H. M., Ullman, M. D., & Future Directions for a Learning Society. (1980). Americans in transition: life changes as reasons for adult learning. New York: College Entrance Examination Board.
- Baca, J. S. (2001). *A place to stand: the making of a poet* (1st ed.). New York: Grove Press.
- Bakhtin, M. M., & Holquist, M. (1981). The dialogic imagination: four essays. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bartholomae, D. (1985). Inventing the university. In E. Cushman, E. Kintgen, B. Kroll & M. Rose (Eds.), *Literacy: a critical sourcebook* (pp. 511-524). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- Barton, D. (2007). Literacy: an introduction to the ecology of written language (2nd ed.). Oxford, UK ; Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell.
- Bean, R. M., Partanen, J., Wright, F., & Aaronson, J. (1989). Attrition in urban basic literacy programs and strategies to increase retention. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, Institute for Practice and Research in Education.

- Becker, G. S. (1964). Human capital; a theoretical and empirical analysis, with special reference to education. New York: National Bureau of Economic Research; distributed by Columbia University Press.
- Beder, H. (1999). The outcomes and impacts of adult literacy education in the United States. Cambridge, MA: NCSALL.
- Beder, H. (2007). Quality instruction in adult literacy education. In A. Belzer (Ed.),
   *Toward defining and improving quality in adult basic education* (pp. 87-106).
   Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Belzer, A. (2007). *Toward defining and improving quality in Adult Basic Education*.Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Bingman, M. B., Ebert, O., & Bell, B. (2000). Outcomes of participation in Adult Basic Education: The importance of learners' perspectives. Retrieved Dec. 8, 2006, from http://gseweb.harvard.edu/~ncsall/research/op\_bingman.pdf.

Brandt, D. (2001). Literacy in American lives. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Brandt, D. (2009). *Literacy and learning: Reflections on writing, reading, and society*. San Francisco: Josey-Bass.
- Bredo, E. (2006). Philosophies of educational research. In J. L. Green, G. Camilli, & P. Elmore (Eds.) *Handbook of complementary methods in education research* (3rd ed., pp. 3-31). Washington, D.C. and Mahwah, NJ: AERA & Erlbaum.
- Brod, S. (1990). Recruiting and retaining language minority students in adult literacy programs (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 321621). Retrieved Mar. 1, 2008, from ERIC database:

http://www.eric.ed.gov/contentdelivery/servlet/ERICServlet?accno=ED321621

- Brod, S. (1995, May). Outreach and retention in adult ESL literacy programs [Electronic Version]. Spring Institute for International Studies CAELA. Retrieved 8 Dec. 2007 from http://www.cal.org/caela/esl\_resources/digests/BROD.html.
- Cain, S. H., & Whalen, B. A. (1977). Adult Basic and Secondary Education program statistics. Fiscal Year 1976 (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 178165). from ERIC database:

http://www.eric.ed.gov/contentdelivery/servlet/ERICServlet?accno=ED178165

- Cameron, S.V. & Heckman, J.J. (1993). The nonequivalence of high school equivalents. *Journal of Labor Economics*, 11(1), 1-47.
- Cervero, R., & Fitzpatrick, T. (1990). The enduring effects of family role and schooling on participation in adult education. *American Journal of Education*, *99* (1), 77-94.
- Cole, G. S. (1984). Adult illiteracy and learning theory: A study of cognition and activity. *Science & Society*, *47*, 451-482.
- Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *The American Journal of Sociology (Supplement: Organizations and Institutions: Sociological and Economic Approaches to the Analysis of Social Structure), 94*, S95-S120.
- Comings, J, Parrella, A, & Soricone L. (2000). Helping adults persist: Four supports *Focus on Basics*, 4A, 1& 3-7.
- Condelli, L. (2007). Accountability and program quality: The third wave. In A. Belzer (Ed.), *Toward defining and improving quality in adult basic education* (pp. xiii, 327 p.). Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Cook, W. D. (1977). *Adult literacy education in the United States*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Corbin, J. M., Strauss, A. L., & Strauss, A. L. (2008). Basics of qualitative research: techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory (3rd ed.). Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.
- Cornelius, J. D. (1991). "When I can read my title clear": Literacy, slavery, and religion in the Antebellum South. Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press.
- Costa, M. (1988). Adult literacy/illiteracy in the United States: a handbook for reference and research. Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-Clio.
- Costa (1980). *A history of the Adult Education Act*. Washington, DC: National Advisory Council for Education.
- Cross, P. (1982). Adults as learners. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Cullen, M.A. (1994). 'Weighing it up': A case study of discontinuing access students (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED379406). Retrieved 1 Mar. 2008, from ERIC Database:

http://www.eric.ed.gov/contentdelivery/servlet/ERICServlet?accno=ED379406

- Cushman, E., Kintgen, E., Kroll, B., & Rose, M. (Eds.). (2001). *Literacy: a critical sourcebook*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- Darkenwald, G. G. (1986). *Adult literacy education: A review of the research and priorities for future inquiry*. New York: Literacy Assistance Center, Inc.
- Dawson, G., & Glaubman, R. (2000). *Life is so good* (1st ed.). New York: Random House.
- Delker, P. (1988). Introduction. In M. Costa (Ed.), Adult literacy/illiteracy in the United States: A handbook for reference and research (pp.xiii-xx). Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.
- Delpit, L. (1995). The Politics of Teaching Literacy Discourse. In E. Cushman, E.
  Kintgen, B. Kroll & M. Rose (Eds.), *Literacy: a critical sourcebook* (pp. 545-554). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- Demetrion, G. (2005). *Conflicting paradigms in adult literacy education: in quest of a U.S. democratic politics of literacy*. Mahwah, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates.
- Denny, V. H. (1992). Access to literacy programs: Perspectives of African-American adults. *Theory into Practice*, *31*(4), 337-341.
- Department of Community Services and Development. (2007). Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. Retrieved September 30, 2009, from http://www.csd.ca.gov/ AboutUs/History.aspx
- Dijk, T. A. (1993). Principles of critical discourse analysis. *Discourse & Society*, 4(2), 249-283.
- Dirkx, J. M., & Jha, L. R. (Fall 1994). Completion and attrition in Adult Basic Education. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 45(1), 269-285.
- Economic Opportunity Act, Pub.L. 88-452, 78 Stat. 508, 42 U.S.C. § 2701, (1964).
- Elliot, N. (2005). On a scale: a social history of writing assessment in America. *Studies in composition and rhetoric vol. 3*
- Eyre, G. (1998). History of the Adult Education Act. Retrieved March 12, 2010, from http://www.naepdc.org/issues/AEAHistort.htm
- Fingeret, A. (1985). North Carolina Adult Basic Education instructional program evaluation. Raleigh, NC: Department of Adult and Community College Education, North Carolina State University.

- Fingeret, H. A., & Drennon, C. (1997). Literacy for life: adult learners, new practices. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Flesch, R. (1955). *Why Johnny can't read--and what you can do about it* (1st ed.). New York: Harper.
- Freire, P., & Ramos, M. B. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Seabury Press.
- Gadsden, V. L. (Autumn, 1992). Giving meaning to literacy: Intergenerational beliefs about access. *Theory into Practice*, 31(4), 328-336.
- Garner, B. (Spring 1997). What impact does the GED have upon earnings? *Bright Ideas*, 6(4).
- Gee, J. P. (1989). Literacy, discourse, and linguistics: Introduction and what is literacy?
  In E. Cushman, E. Kintgen, B. Kroll & M. Rose (Eds.), *Literacy: a critical* sourcebook (pp. 525-544). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory; strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co.
- Goatly, A. (1997). The language of metaphors. London: Routledge.
- Goody, J. (1977). *The domestication of the savage mind*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Gordon, E. E., & Gordon, E. H. (2003). *Literacy in America: historic journey and contemporary solutions*. Westport, CT.: Praeger.
- Goto, S., & Leister, M. (2010, June 3-6, 2010). *Critical conversations: Basic skills students at the table*. Paper presented at the Adult Education, The Next 50 Years: Our Future continues Through an Investment in Research, Sacramento, California.
- Grabill, J. T. (2001). *Community literacy programs and the politics of change*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Gray, W. S. (1953). *Preliminary survey of methods of teaching reading and writing* Paris: Education Clearing House.
- Halperin, S. (December 22, 2006). Reflections on the fortieth birthday of the Adult Education Act of 1966. Retrieved November 30, 2009, from http://librarian.lishost.org/?p=628

- Hamann, E. T. (1994). Ten complementary principles to retain LEP adults in a bilingual family literacy program (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 376 743). from ERICdatabase:http://www.eric.ed.gov/contentdelivery/servlet/
  ERICServlet?accno=ED376743.
- Heath, S. B. (1983). *Ways with words: language, life, and work in communities and classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hirsch, E. D., Kett, J. F., & Trefil, J. S. (1988). *The dictionary of cultural literacy*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Hollenbeck, K. (1993). Classrooms in the workplace: workplace literacy programs in small and medium-sized firms. Kalamazoo, Mich.: W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.
- Holstein, J. A., & Gubrium, J. F. (1995). *The active interview*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Hunter, C. S. J., Harman, D., & Ford Foundation. (1979). *Adult illiteracy in the United States: A report to the Ford Foundation*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Immigration Act, Pub. L. No. 64-301, 39 Stat. 874, (1917).

- Internet History Sourcebooks Project. (2001). Modern history sourcebook: President Lyndon B. Johnson: The War on Poverty, March 1964 from Public Papers of U.S. Presidents, Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963-1964 from http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1964johnson-warpoverty.html
- Irwin, P. (1991). *National literacy act of 1991*. from http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/ data/ericdocs2sql/content\_storage\_01/0000019b/80/23/c2/4c.pdf.
- Kambouri, M., and Francis, H. (1994). Time to leave? (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 377 342). from ERIC database: http://www.eric.ed.gov/ contentdelivery/servlet/ERICServlet?accno=ED377342
- Kerka, S. (1995). Adult learner retention revisited (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 389880). Retrieved Mar. 1, 2008, from ERIC database: http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/contentdelivery/servlet/ERICServlet?acc no=ED389880.

- Knoblauch, C. H. (1990). Literacy and the politics of education. In R. Norgaard. (Ed.), *Composing Knowledge: Readings for College Writers*. Boston: Bedford/ St Martin's.
- Kozol, J. (1985). Illiterate America (1st ed.). Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday.
- Kremen, G. R. (1974). MDTA: The origins of the Manpower Development and Training Act of 1962 [Electronic Version]. Retrieved 30 November 2009 from http://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/mono-mdtatext.htm#
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson , M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Levine, K. (1982). Functional literacy: Fond illusions and false economies. *Harvard Educational Review*, 52, 249-266.
- Lewis, T. (1997). America's choice: Literacy or productivity? *Curriculum Inquiry*, 27(4), 391-421.
- Limage, L. (1990). Adult literacy and basic education in Europe and North America: From recognition to provision. *Comparative Education*, *26*(1), 125-140.
- Lytle, S. (1991). Living literacy: Rethinking development in adult literacy. In E. Cushman, E. Kintgen, B. Kroll & M. Rose (Eds.), *Literacy: A critical sourcebook* (pp. 376-401). Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin's.
- Malicky, G. V., & Norman, C. A. (Fall 1994). Participation patterns in adult literacy programs. *Adult Basic Education*, *4*(3), 144-156.
- Manpower Development and Training Act, Pub. L. No. 87-415, (1962).
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2006). *Designing qualitative research* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2011). *Designing qualitative research* (5th ed.). London: Sage Publications.
- Merrifield, J. (1988). Contested ground: Performance accountability in adult basic education. Cambridge, MA: National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy.

National Institute for Literacy. (2004). National Institute for Literacy report on activities and accomplishments: FY 1993-FY 2002. Retrieved Nov. 29, 2006, from http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/publications/accomplish.pdf

National Literacy Act, Pub. L. No. 102-73, (1991).

- Nelms, W. (1997) *Cora Wilson Stewart: Crusader against illiteracy*. Jefferon, NC: McFarland and Co.
- Newman, A. P., & Beverstock, C. (1990). Adult literacy: contexts & challenges. Newark, Del. International Reading Association.
- Northcutt, N. (1975). *Adult functional competency: a summary*. Austin: University of Texas at Austin, Industrial and Business Training Bureau.
- Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE). Adult education and literacy. Retrieved November 30, 2009, from http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/ AdultEd/index.html
- Ong, W. (1986). Writing is a technology that restructures thought. In G. Baumann (Ed.), *The Written word: literacy in transition* (pp. 23-50). New York: Clarendon Press.
- Perin, D., & Greenberg, D. (July 1994). Understanding dropout in an urban worker Education Program. Urban Education, 29(2), 169-187.
- Pink, D. H. (2009). *Drive: the surprising truth about what motivates us*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books
- Pollak, S. J. (2004). "Economic Opportunity Act of 1964." Major Acts of Congress. [Electronic Version]. *The Gale Group Inc*. Retrieved December 18, 2009 from http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3407400076.html.
- Prendergast, C. (2003). Literacy and racial justice: the politics of learning after Brown v. Board of Education. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- ProLiteracy America (2003). U.S. adult literacy programs: Making a difference: A review of research on positive outcomes achieved by literacy programs and the people they serve. Syracuse.
- Pugsley, R. S. (1987). National data update, national conference, state directors of adult education. Washington, DC: Office of Vocational and Adult Education.
- Purcell-Gates, V. (1995). Other people's words: the cycle of low literacy. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

- Quigley, B. A. (1992). Looking back in anger: The influences of schooling on illiterate adults. *The Journal of Education*, 174(4), 103-115.
- Quigley, B. A. (1997). *Rethinking literacy education: The critical need for practicebased change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Quigley, B. A. (1998). The first three weeks: A critical time for motivation. *Focus on the Basics*, 2(A), 6-11.
- Reagan, R. (September 7, 1983). *Remarks at a White House Ceremony Announcing the Adult Literacy Initiative*
- Roberts, P. (1995). Defining Literacy: Paradise, Nightmare or Red Herring? *British Journal of Educational Studies*, *43*(4), 412-432.
- Robinson, M. (1985). National Adult Literacy Project 1983-1985: Final Report [Electronic Version] from http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/ content\_storage\_01/0000019b/80/32/19/11.pdf.
- Rogers, A. (2000). Literacy Comes Second: Working with Groups in Developing Societies. *Development in Practice*, *10*(2), 236-240.
- Sahlman, W. A. (1990). The structure and governance of venture-capital organizations. *Journal of Financial Economics*, 27(2), 473-521.
- Sapienza, H. J., & Gupta, A. K. (1994). Impact of agency risks and task uncertainty on venture capitalist-CEO interaction. *Academy of Management Journal*, 37(6), 1618-1632.
- Saussure, F. d., Bally, C., Sechehaye, A., & Riedlinger, A. (1986). *Course in general linguistics*. LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court.
- Schatzman, L., & Strauss, A. L. (1973). Field research: strategies for a natural sociology. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
- Schultz, T. W. (1977). Investment in human capital. In J. Karabel & A. H. Halsey (Eds.), *Power and ideology in education* (pp. 313-324). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Scribner, S. (1984). Literacy in three metaphors. American Journal of Education, 93(21).
- Schiappa, E. (2003). *Defining reality: definitions and the politics of meaning*.Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

- Silverman, D. (1993). Interpreting qualitative data: methods for analysing talk, text and interaction. London: Sage.
- Smith, A. (1776). An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations. London:W.Strahan and T. Cadell.
- Steeman, C. (1986/2008). *Landscape for a good woman*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers.
- Stewart, C. W. (1922). *Moonlight schools: For the emancipation of adult illiterates*. New York: E. P. Dutton.
- Sticht, T. (1988-1989). Adult literacy education. *Review of Research in Education*, 15, 59-96.
- Sticht, T. (1999). A reposting of NLA Listserv: Research Note 10/2/99. Retrieved Nov. 30, 2009, from http://wiki.literacytent.org/index.php/ScientificbasedEdResearchPart2.
- Sticht, T. (2000). The Adult Education and Literacy System (AELS) in the United States: Moving from the margins to the mainstream of education. Retrieved 1 May 2008, from http://www.nald.ca/library/research/sticht/AELSinUS/inUS.PDF
- Sticht, T. (2002). The rise of the Adult Education and Literacy System in the United States: 1600-2000. *1 May 2008*, from http://www.ncsall.net/?id=576
- Sticht, T. (2005). Functional context education: Making learning relevant in the 21st century.
- Stubblefield, H. W., & Keane, P. (1994). Adult education in the American experience: from the colonial period to the present (1st ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Robert W. Sweet, J. Illiteracy: An Incurable Disease or Education Malpractice? Retrieved October 13, 2010, from http://www.nrrf.org/essay\_Illiteracy.html
- Tough, A. (1982). *Intentional changes: A fresh approach to helping people change*. Chicago: Follett.
- Tracy-Mumford, F., Baker, T., Bristow, P., Companiony, I., Marshall, J., Matthews, D., et al. (1994). Student retention: Creating student success (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 375 299). Retrieved 1 Mar. 2008, from ERIC database: http://www.eric.ed.gov/contentdelivery/servlet/

ERICServlet?accno=ED375299

- Tyler, J. H. (2005). The General Educational Development (GED) credential: History, current research, and directions for policy and practice [Electronic Version]. *Review of Adult Learning and Literacy*, 5, 45-84.
- Vanderpool, N. M., & Brown, W. E. (March 1994). Implications of a peer telephone network on adult learner GPA and retention. *Journal of College Student Development*, 35(2), 125-128.
- Vann, B. A., & Hinton, B. E. (Summer 1994). Workplace social networks and their relationship to student retention in on-site GED programs. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 5(2), 141-151.
- Venezky, R., Wagner, D., & Ciliberti, B. (Eds.). (1990). *Toward defining literacy*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Venezky, R. L., Sabatini, J. P., Brooks, C., & Carino, C. (June 1996). Policy and practice in adult learning: A case study perspective. University of Delaware.
- Wikelund, K., Reder, S., & Hart-Landsberg, S. (1992). Expanding theories of adult literacy participation: A literature review (Technical Report TR92-1).
  Philadelphia, PA: NCAL.
- Witty, P. A., & Goldberg, S. (Dec. 1943). The Army's training program for illiterate, non-English-speaking, and educationally retarded men. *The Elementary English Review*, 20, 306-311.
- Wlodkowski, R. J. (2008). *Enhancing adult motivation to learn: A comprehensive guide for teaching all adults* (3rd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Imprint.

Workforce Investment Act, Pub. L. No. 105-220, (1998).

- Wrigley, H. S. (1993). One size does not fit all: Educational perspectives and program practices in the U.S. *TESOL Quarterly*, 27(3), 449-465.
- Yancey, K. B. (1998). *Reflection in the writing classroom*. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press.
- Yerkes, R. M. (Ed.). (1921). Psychological examining in the United States Army: Memoirs of the National Academy of Sciences (Vol. 15). Washington: GPO.